# The New Criterion

December 2003

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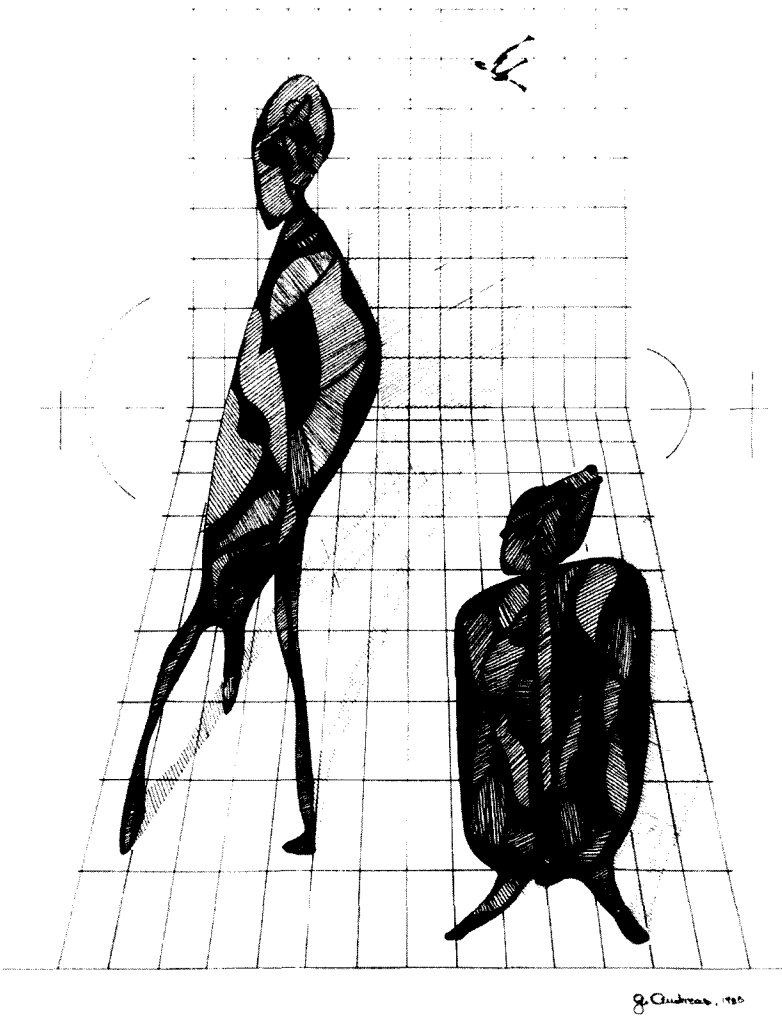

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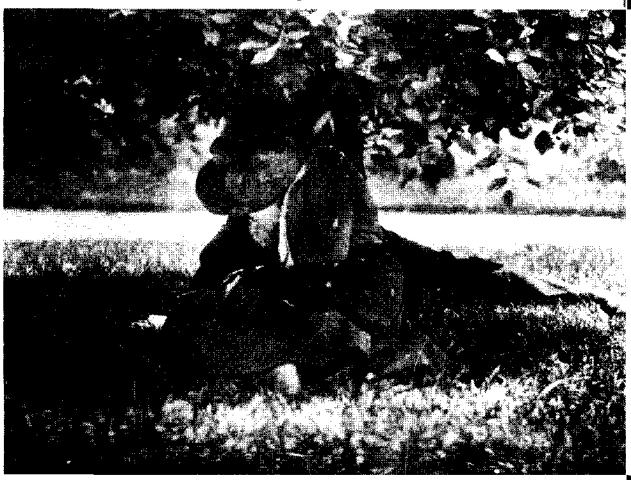

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# Notes & Comments: December 2003

## *Reviving the bard*

Longtime readers of *The New Criterion* will recall that in years past we often had occasion to criticize the National Endowment for the Arts. Lurching from a demotic populism, on the one hand (Elvis Presley, folk art, . . .), to the darker precincts of the transgressive "cutting-edge" (Robert Mapplethorpe, Andreas Serrano, . . .), the NEA was an agency in search of its soul.

No doubt legitimate questions can be raised about whether the federal government should be directly involved in supporting the arts at all. We suspect that a good case can be made that that task is better handled privately. But if we are going to have direct taxpayer support of the arts—and we are—let's have responsible and intelligent public support. In this space in September 1989, we argued that

> public cultural support cannot be about the provision of entertainment, either upscale or for the masses; it cannot be about the accomplishment of immediate and partisan social and political goals; it cannot be about the stretching of the limits of permissible personal behavior; it cannot validate the so-called "cutting edge" of art or thought.
>
> . . . [P]ublic support must concentrate on nothing less than the transmission of the civilization of the past, via the present, to the future. Public support thus must concern itself with civilizing works of art, literature, and thought, their preservation, study, communication, and regeneration.

It is gratifying to report that the National Endowment for the Arts seems finally to have come around to our way of thinking on these issues. Under the leadership of the distinguished poet and critic Dana Gioia, the NEA has said farewell to the ephemeral and the meretricious. One evidence of the agency's new commitment to quality is "Shakespeare in American Communities." This ambitious fourteen-month program—supported by the Sallie Mae Fund and Arts Midwest in conjunction with the NEA—will send six theater companies across the country to perform *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Richard III*. In addition, the NEA is collaborating with the Department of Defense to bring a tour of *Macbeth* to military bases in the United States. ("If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly": a useful bit of advice for a soldier.)

According to a press release, "Shakespeare in American Communities"—which will bring these plays to more than one hundred towns and cities—is the largest tour of Shakespeare in America's history. Size isn't everything, of course. But it seems clear from the sober educational materials accom-



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panying the program that the NEA has gone to great lengths to be sure that what people will get from this project is Shakespeare and not some postmodern or dumbed-down travesty. We will not be subjected to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in a concentration camp or *Richard III* presented as an allegory of the perfidy of George W. Bush or the American military policy.

In a letter introducing the initiative, Mr. Gioia expressed the hope that "Shakespeare in American Communities" would "help revive the American tradition of theatrical touring and . . . bring the finest art to the broadest possible public." The emphasis, we believe, is as much on "finest art" as on "broadest possible public." It is a worthy, a noble ambition, and it promises to help foster a more lively and informed interest in Shakespeare. Productions began in September with a suite of shows in New England. For more information, readers may call the National Endowment for the Arts at 202.682.5400 or visit their website for the program at www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org.

## *Earth to Gore*

The novelist and fantasist Gore Vidal has always been a political extremist. With him, it is business as usual to describe respectable conservative journalists as fascists or worse. The hysterical access of anti-Americanism and anti-Bush sentiment that has swept through the chattering classes of Europe and America in the last few years seems to have finally pushed the poor fellow over the edge. In "Uncensored Gore," an interview in the November 14–20 issue of *LA Weekly*, an "alternative" (that is, rabidly left-wing) California paper, Vidal lets loose with a torrent of paranoid animadversion that should make his friends concerned for his sanity.

The ostensible occasion for the interview was the publication of a new book by Vidal about George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. The real subject of the interview, however, was Gore Vidal's feelings of bitterness about America and its leaders. Vidal begins with a little throat-clearing in order to inform us that "Ours is a totally corrupt society. The presidency is for sale." Really? Is Bill Gates or Warren Buffet going to snap up that prize? But Vidal doesn't really get going until he utters the name "Bush." It seems to act like a drug on him, obliterating his ability to make distinctions. Reflecting on the Enron affair and other recent business scandals, Vidal concludes that what we have in our society is "despotism."

> It is the sort of authoritarian rule that the Bush people have given us. The USA PATRIOT Act is as despotic as anything Hitler came up with—even using much of the same language. . . .
>
> I think of [Bush and John Ashcroft] as an alien army. They have managed to take over everything, and quite in the open. We have a deranged president. We have despotism. We have no due process.

"Authoritarian rule"? "As despotic as anything Hitler came up with"? "An alien army"? Why does any self-respecting publication pay the slightest attention to someone capable of such rantings? *LA Weekly* described Gore Vidal as "one of our most controversial social critics." Alas, he is only one of our most deranged.

## *Ted Kennedy weighs in*

Gore Vidal is not the only voluble anti-Bush partisan addicted to verbal extremity. Consider Senator Edward Kennedy's recent comments about Democratic efforts to block the President's judicial nominees, a group that includes the Hispanic lawyer Miguel Estrada and the Black judge Janice Rogers Brown. Speaking on the Senate floor, the Senior Senator from Massa-



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chusetts dilated on "the resolution and the determination of the members of the United States Senate to continue to resist any Neanderthal that is nominated by this president of the United States for any court." "Neanderthal"? Just imagine the media firestorm had a Republican Senator made that comment.

## *Honoring Leszek Kolakowski*

It was with great pleasure that we read the announcement last month that the Polish philosopher (and occasional contributor to *The New Criterion*) Leszek Kolakowski had been awarded the first Kluge Prize. The new prize, which carries a purse of $1 million, is funded by the philanthropist John W. Kluge and administered by the Library of Congress. Designed to honor lifetime achievement in the humanities, the prize could not have found a more worthy recipient. Although best known for *Main Currents of Marxism*, a monumental three-volume dissection of "the greatest fantasy of our century," Kolakowski is also the author of a score of books on philosophical and theological topics from Plotinus and the Church fathers, to the English empiricists, Edmund Husserl, and Henri Bergson. The seventy-six-year-old philosopher grew up in Lodz and lived through German occupation and Soviet domination of Poland. In 1968, having lost his position at Warsaw University, he left Poland for England, and subsequently taught at Yale, the University of Chicago, and Oxford, where he now lives in semi-retirement. In the 1980s, working from abroad, Kolakowski was active in supporting the Solidarity movement that helped liberate Poland from Soviet tyranny. Totalitarianism was a daily fact of life and later an object of study for Kolakowski. But his deeper subject has been the insidious variety of human bondage: not just political tyranny but also the sundry metaphysical tyrannies with which mankind has striven mightily to perpetuate its enslavement even as it mouths the word "freedom." Of particular relevance to our own situation today is his analysis of "The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society" (the title of an essay in his book *Modernity on Endless Trial*). Among the many dangers that threaten a pluralist society from within, Kolakowski notes, perhaps the most destructive is "the weakening of the psychological preparedness to defend it." It is a lesson we have yet to master.

## *A note on art*

Continuing a tradition that we began in December 2001, we have devoted a large part of this expanded issue of *The New Criterion* to the visual arts. Michael J. Lewis opens the issue with "Architecture After Modernism," his brilliant contribution to "Lengthened Shadows," our year-long series on American institutions in the twenty-first century. In addition to a bumper crop of exhibition reviews, this issue also includes "In the Kitchen of Art," a splendid essay on art conservation by the distinguished conservator and art dealer Marco Grassi, and a conversation between the figurative painter William Bailey and the poet Mark Strand. In different ways, these pieces take us deep into the workshop of art: Mr. Grassi's into some of its technical aspects, Messrs. Bailey and Strand's into some aesthetic and historical issues. Mr. Bailey reflects partly on the evolution of his own work, partly on the contemporary art scene. As he notes, there are many fine figurative painters working today, but it remains "very hard" to see their work "because of the gallery system and the lock-step of museum curators and because it doesn't fit in well with the established conventions of vanguard art. In other words, if you can't put one on a wall with typical vanguard work . . . then it might as well be ignored." It is one of the tasks of *The New Criterion* to move beyond "typical vanguard work" to the real thing. Mr. Bailey's own work is one example. We discuss several other contenders in the pages that follow.



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Lengthened Shadows: IV

# "All sail, no anchor": architecture after modernism

*by Michael J. Lewis*

When architecture gets a hall of fame, it needs to find a niche for a certain amiable rogue I will refer to as Palladio of the Wastepaper Basket. He made his mark during the 1960s at Yale's school of architecture. There it is the monthly task of students to design a hypothetical building, for which they make a model out of cardboard and foam core in a notoriously time-consuming operation. The process culminates in the *crit*, the stressful and often prickly review session in which visiting critics inspect the models and question the students, unfailingly finding the weak points of both. It is often the case that a verbally nimble student makes a better impression than an inarticulate designer, even one with a better design.

Our Palladio of the Wastepaper Basket found it more congenial to talk than cut cardboard. He prowled the halls of the architecture school at night, ransacking the trash for old models that had been discarded by their makers when the concept failed to stick. These he dusted off and submitted as his own work, often for a different class and a different assignment. A model of a circular drive-in restaurant might do duty as a church, for example, or—shifting the scale—a one-room beach house. Students watched their jetsam float back into the classroom but no one took it amiss. It seemed to fit the anarchic spirit of the times. But it also fits the spirit of *our* time, perhaps in a deeper way, when the words that fly around architecture seem fundamentally independent of it, and have precious little to do with its vital essence.

Fifty years ago there was no such split: architecture and the words written about it stood in harmonious concord. This is seldom true in art, where theory and practice normally race wildly after one another. But modern architecture reconciled the opposites of book and building to an astonishing degree and achieved a surpassing programmatic unity. Modernism's founding figures, especially Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, were themselves theorists, and both wrote and designed. And the principles carefully spelled out in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (1923)—the open plan, the elimination of ornament, the rational use of modern materials—lent themselves to programmatic abstraction in a way that those of neoclassicism or the Baroque could not. This was more than mere intellectual consistency. It was the broad and comprehensive unity of the Modern Movement itself, of which architecture was but one lobe, and in which painting and sculpture, music and poetry aspired to the same radical emancipation from traditional structures of form and authority.

We take for granted the conquest of America by this high modernism, as something that was in the course of things inevitable, but in many ways it was quite alien to the American experience. A man of the 1920s would have scoffed at the notion that America needed a radical modernism, for



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America already was modern. Jazz, cinema, the radio (a national craze since 1925), and the affordable automobile were all quintessentially modern phenomena. So was the fanciful Art Deco skyscraper: the Chrysler Building with its winged chrome sentinels or the Empire State Building, whose soaring spire was to be a mooring mast for zeppelins, yet another modern phenomenon.

But this American modernism was organic rather than programmatic, and was accomplished without benefit of theory and manifesto; it was modernism without program. Its achievements were made possible by modern engineering and science, manufactured by the modern assembly line, and disseminated through mass-marketing (likewise modern), without central coordination. Its most striking aspect was its unpremeditated, even inadvertent character. Some of its accomplishments were not even the product of conscious thought, let alone theory. For example, the new skyscrapers: Prior to 1916, skyscrapers were permitted to rise without limit, to blacken the streets below and to cast their neighbors to the north into permanent shadow. In that year New York City passed a remarkable zoning ordinance that sought to protect property rights by restricting the height and bulk of skyscrapers. At each increment of height, a building was required to step back a prescribed number of feet (depending on the width of the street below); on only one quarter of its footprint could it rise without constraint. The result was the characteristic chiseled silhouette of the modern skyscraper (which fortuitously resembled ancient Mayan pyramids, then being studied, and brought about a charmingly incongruous fad for Mayan ornament). Here was an absolutely new architectural form, as distinctively American as the colonial saltbox, whose principal formal element—its forceful and expressive contour—was not an artistic invention at all, but a hard-earned armistice line between the demands of real estate and of legislation. Such was America's non-programmatic modernism.

The modernism that was simultaneously arising in Europe followed an entirely different trajectory, where it was both more urgent, in the wake of the First World War, and more centralized. To a continent mutilated by four years of cruel trench warfare, during which time it built little, the urgency was understandable. And the centralization was the normal state of affairs in Europe, where architectural patronage and industrial policy had always been a matter of state patronage, and was regularized in the state architectural bureaucracies that had arisen in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The socialist or paternalist model of patronage on which modernism depended was the natural successor to this.

*A man of the 1920s would have scoffed at the notion that America needed a radical modernism, for America already was modern.*

Le Corbusier's audacious and daft proposal to demolish medieval Paris and replace it with serried ranks of rational towers differed from the urban interventions of Napoleon or Baron Haussmann only in degree.

In America, where architecture was historically a matter of private taste and commercial patronage, this model had but little applicability. Americans were hardly ignorant of European innovations but partook of them as consumers rather than believers, much as American painters had once discovered French Impressionism, stripped it of its social and theoretical content, and brought it home as a lighthearted and diverting fashion. When George Howe adapted the flat roof and abstract cubical massing of European modernism, it was for a fashionable suburban house. Most American architects were already moving in the general direction of their modernist counterparts, toward simplified volumes and flowing space. They needed no ukase from



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Le Corbusier prohibiting the cornice; the cornice had already fallen in disrepute by the early 1920s, as had the woman's bustle, and neither required a theoretical manifesto.

So long as capitalism thundered along, and the Twenties still roared, Americans had only passing interest in Europe's programmatic modernism. All this changed in October 1929. The Great Depression ravaged no American institution, the stock market excepted, as much as it did architecture. The violent, almost instantaneous contraction in building activity was stupefying. A single example from T. E. Tallmadge's 1936 *Story of Architecture in America* shows its magnitude. In 1927 the city of Chicago approved 12,025 building permits, for a total value of nearly $353,000,000. In 1932 the figure was only 467 permits, valued at $4,000,000—barely one percent of its pre-Depression activity. The figures for New York are similar. The Empire State Building, begun in 1929 and finished in 1931, was the end of the line. In short order, almost the entirety of the American architectural profession was unemployed. As private and commercial patronage stagnated, the American architectural world took on European lines. The state became by default the principal architectural patron; the buildings being built were schools, hospitals, community centers, and—above all—social housing projects, not skyscrapers or suburban manors. The whole world of Twenties eclecticism, of faience-tiled movie palaces, neo-Mediterranean villas, and *moderne* stores, had vanished, along with the capitalist patronage that had sustained them. Under these changed circumstances, European modernism looked different indeed.

The new state of affairs was captured in *The International Style*, the catalogue to the celebrated 1932 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock. In it the buildings that were heralded a few years earlier as the very embodiment of American might and sophistication were subjected to malicious mockery. Instead of bold acrobatics in the sky, these were the vulgar acts of crass commercial clients. In the book's preface, Alfred H. Barr, the founding director of MOMA, did not try to mask his contempt: "We are asked to take seriously the architectural taste of real estate speculators, renting agents, and mortgage brokers." Of course it was easy to scoff at capitalism in 1932 when it lay prostate. Only after their owners were penniless did the jaunty forms of Art Deco skyscrapers begin to look ludicrous. The Empire State Building was discredited not by the fanciful zeppelin mooring mast on its summit but by the apple vendors huddling around its base.

It is one of history's fateful coincidences that at the very moment of the collapse of America's architectural patronage, a stream of refugees began to make their way from Hitler's Germany to the United States. These included the key figures of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who found plum positions in America's schools of architecture and design, the former at Harvard and the latter at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). To a remarkable extent, American conditions now recapitulated those of Europe in the 1920s: a dire economic crisis, enlightened government patronage, and an activist cadre of influential modernists inspired by a sense of mission. Of course the prostrate condition of commerce would not last, but, when it recovered, America's architectural culture was permanently changed.

In terms of absolute numbers, the European émigrés were negligible, but they exercised a wildly disproportionate influence. And if the great body of American architects was indifferent or hostile, they were now jobless and therefore irrelevant. In short order, other schools of architecture followed the lead of Harvard, and wherever they landed, modernist deans conducted swift and efficient purges of dissenters. A few anecdotes suffice: at Washington University, St. Louis, the modernist dean Buford Pickens opened his Saturday newspaper to see a rendering of a neo-Georgian office tower by one of his instructors—rank



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heresy; the man was fired on the spot. At the University of Pennsylvania, the chief instructor in design was Harry Sternfeld, the 1914 winner of the prestigious Beaux-Arts Institute's Paris Prize and the designer of Philadelphia's most imaginative Art Deco and *moderne* buildings. Unable to fire so prominent a figure, the new modernist dean relegated him to teaching "professional practice," an act on the order of requiring Cézanne to teach the care and cleaning of paint brushes. Every school has similar stories. And each school eliminated or drastically truncated its courses in the history of architecture, which had once been the mainstay of architectural literacy and their chief source of raw material for design.

These purges call to mind the political dimension of high modernism. Architecture was but one of many modernisms, each drawing strength from the others, but all were deeply conscious of the greatest modernism of all, the Russian Revolution, which always lay in the background. Modernism came to America at a time when world revolution still seemed distinctly possible, if not imminent.[1] And it came surrounded by that mightiest of accompaniments, the bold and silencing aura of inevitability. If the Russian Revolution could topple those principal pillars of western culture—religion, capitalism, class structure, the family itself—how much easier was it to sweep away music's tonality, poetry's meter, or architecture's gabled roof? Of all the arguments that modernism could bring in favor of its spacious claims, historical inevitability was the one that brooked no reply.

But even as modernism established itself in America, the cultural vanguard of the West was gradually losing faith in the Soviet Union—a prolonged process that stretched from the purge trials of 1937 to the invasion of Hungary in 1956—and the Modern Movement as a whole shed its presumption of historical inevitability. A bundle of separate and discrete modernisms, literary, musical, and so forth, remained, still omnipotent in the institutional compounds in which they were ensconced but without the bracing sense of being part of a collective movement that was reshaping the whole of civilization.

Ironically, this happened just as American modernism was enjoying its most conspicuous public successes, in the 1950s.

*The Great Depression ravaged no American institution, the stock market excepted, as much as it did architecture.*

America's commercial patronage had long since rebounded and made its peace with modernism; in fact, America's greatest monuments of modernism are those raised by corporations: the Seagram Building, Lever House, the TWA Terminal, the headquarters of Pittsburgh Plate Glass. Here was the high water mark of modernism, when modern architecture was endorsed equally by American business, government, and the academy. Thus Gropius could design both the Pan Am Building in New York and the American embassy in Athens, even as he presided over Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. By then there was no longer any appreciable dissent. For a brief and startling moment, the architectural avant garde and establishment had merged and become identical.

Passing in turn through depression, world war, and prosperity, modernism's hegemony and overweening moral authority lasted but a generation. If one had to pick a death date, the point at which the collapse of

1 This is not to say that the early modernists were necessarily Communists, although many were, at the Bauhaus and elsewhere. After all, Mies van der Rohe blithely submitted projects for Nazi buildings before eventually fleeing Germany following the close of the Bauhaus in 1933. But this is nothing more than garden-variety artistic opportunism, the same sort that permitted the painter David to serve in turn the *ancien régime*, the French Revolution, and Napoleon.



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modernism was irrevocable, one could do worse than 1968—a year when so many things seemed to go wrong at once. Since then no movement has enjoyed anything remotely comparable to its prestige and authority. In fact, the last point of common agreement on which the dissenters to modernism concurred before they fragmented into a welter of contending tendencies and movements was the fact of modernism's failure. Here was the last consensus, the last fixed navigational point on the horizon (the same role played in the pictorial arts by Clement Greenberg's formalism, which fell from favor at this same moment: in a trackless ocean, one navigates from the well-documented shipwreck).

The critique of modernism had both a theoretical and an empirical wing. The theoretical assault took modern architecture to task for its reductivism, its mad attempt to encompass the tempest of human experience within the hard matrix of rational form. Empirical critics had it easier; they only had to *look*, and soon assembled a vast roster of exhibits: malevolent social housing projects, totalitarian megastructures, and cities disfigured by blundering urban renewal campaigns. Jane Jacobs, that perceptive observer of urban life, produced the most damning manifesto of all, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a book with a startling international resonance, particularly in Germany. Other thoughtful observers of public life and culture, notably William H. Whyte, followed in her path.

The most deadly challenge of all, however, came from within the ranks of modernism itself, and bore the imprimatur of the Museum of Modern Art, the keeper of the modernist flame. This was Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1965), a book that did much to extinguish that flame. As with Gorbachev's *perestroika*, there are some paths of reform that, once launched, soon acquire their own willful momentum. *Complexity and Contradiction*, an incendiary manifesto effectively disguised as an interminable art history lecture, used examples as diverse as Michelangelo and Levittown to show that the formal clarity of modernism—its chilly, ruthless idealism—represented a fatal diminution of architecture's expressive power: its infinite capacity to challenge the intellect, to bewilder, inform, and delight.

Venturi drew his examples across the whole of architectural history and geography, reproduced in tiny postage-stamp images. Having been banished from schools of architecture, history was now permitted in once more, although under a sort of probation—not as style (a formal and coherent system of design) nor as archaeology (forms derived from certain historical and cultural conditions), but simply as a great schoolhouse of graphic ideas, whose origin and authorship was ultimately irrelevant.

And so, one by one, the separate pillars of modernism were kicked away during the course of the 1960s. But to demolish an edifice is one thing and to raise one quite another, and here the critical facility proved mightier than the creative. While the past few decades have given rise to a dazzling pageant of styles and movements, none of them has come remotely close to replacing the role played by mid-century modernism.

Of course, not all modernists practiced the rarefied, haiku-lite minimalism of Mies van der Rohe, and one faction, the New Brutalists, sought to restore architecture's lost physicality. This they achieved with concrete, a material as modern as steel but with the visceral properties of weight, texture, and bulk. Beginning in England in the mid-1950s, and soon reaching the United States, the New Brutalists produced muscularly textured buildings clad in rippling corrugated concrete whose surfaces were coarse enough to draw blood. It took only a few conspicuous examples—Yale's Art and Architecture Building by Paul Rudolph and Boston City Hall by Kallmann, McKinnell, and Knowles—for the public to recoil violently from Brutalism and its claim that its focus on architecture's palpably physical nature was a gesture of humanism.



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Others handled concrete more adroitly and serenely. The Philadelphia architect (and mentor to Venturi) Louis I. Kahn formulated a stately, substantial modernism, constructed of masonry, and evoking the weight and permanence of the great buildings of the past. At their best, his works have the tragic dignity of archaeological ruins. Kahn was a late bloomer; after having been schooled in the early 1920s according to the old Beaux-Arts system with its insistence on strong axes and geometric order, he cast this off to embrace the flowing space and dematerialized planes of modernism. Still, he never quite fit in as a mainstream modernist. Only in the 1960s did he find his voice, when he reconciled modernism with the classical principles he had encountered as a student and during subsequent travel to Europe. In such masterworks as the Kimbell Art Museum and the Salk Institute at La Jolla, he triumphantly rehabilitated those respective victims of Mies and Le Corbusier: the wall and the room.

The quiet introspective character of Kahn's work lent itself to civic commissions, but not to houses or commercial buildings. Moreover its essential seriousness made it suspect in the eyes of a generation wearied of Modernism's self-consciously heroic stance, and ultimately Kahn's legacy has been more inspirational than practical. Another paragon of concrete was Eero Saarinen, of Cranbrook, whose great TWA Terminal was itself a diagram of flight, concrete frozen into great liquid arcs, depicting a type of architectural energy that had not been exploited since the Baroque: torque. But this veered close to expressionism, which as a highly personal language was ill-suited to the formation of a collective language. Saarinen's forms are still reprised whenever a building needs to look like a snail or conch, such as hockey rinks, but his influence essentially ended with his premature death in 1961. (Nonetheless the writhing forms of Frank Gehry, a student when Saarinen was in his glory, betray a lingering influence.)

But these were late modernisms, not anti-modernisms. They still accepted the central imperative of modernism, that a radically new age required radically new forms. Ultimately it is skepticism or derision of this claim that distinguishes the non-modernist, or postmodernist, from the modernist. Even when otherwise using modernist materials, detailing, and planning—these lessons of modernism were not easily unlearned—it was their anti-heroic stance that indelibly marked them. And it was in Robert Venturi that anti-heroism found its anti-hero.

Venturi's buildings in and around Philadelphia put his doctrine of complexity and contradiction into practice. His first major work, Guild House (1962), managed the hat trick of violating every norm of high modernism—it had a monumental arched entrance, a clear hierarchy of major and minor spaces, ambiguous and multivalent architectural elements—and did so within the context of a modest brick home for aged Quakers. Even the dull brick wall at the rear was radical, an explicit reference to the undistinguished factory architecture of the neighborhood. This was a revolutionary nod to *context*, that most humble of architecture criteria, and one which the International Style, with its universal aspirations, had swept from consideration.

A few years later, Venturi's celebrated Mother's House rehabilitated the gable and the chimney, evoking the great Shingle Style architecture of the nineteenth century, and opening the gates to a deluge of historical references, all playing across the plane of the façade in lively calligraphic animation. In place of the laconic Cartesian order of Mies, here was an architecture that not only spoke to the viewer but did so volubly.

Venturi's book and buildings helped set in motion the movement that came to be known as Postmodernism, although he himself has rejected the term. With its stance of permissive eclecticism, openness to history, and sense of responsibility to making the city more humane and livable, the movement proved enormously attractive. Venturi was soon followed by Charles



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Moore, Michael Graves, Robert A. M. Stern, and others, the high-spirited doyens of postmodernism. Even Philip Johnson joined in with his AT&T Building in New York, a skyscraper with a broken pediment at the skyline, penance perhaps for the abuse he heaped on Art Deco skyscrapers during his youth. For a brief moment around 1980 it seemed as if postmodernism offered a worthy and viable successor to modernism, which might knit the raveled sleave of history, reconnecting the orphaned present to the great channel of the past. There was a great optimism and idealism about this, and those who were in schools of architecture, here or abroad, at that time will recall the giddy hopes that then blazed up around postmodernism.

Although it was not immediately apparent, a certain paradox afflicted the Venturi rebellion. On the one hand, it was wonderfully whimsical. Its overflowing bounty of irreverence seemed essential, its laughter the only sure way of deflating the prim custodians of modernism. This was the era of Pop, after all, of "make love not war," and Venturi's aphorisms had the pithy punchiness of protest slogans like "Less is a Bore," "ugly and ordinary," "Main Street is almost all right." After architecture's long afternoon of Teutonic severity, this whimsy came as a much needed tonic. (It is difficult now to imagine how heavy the authoritarian hand rested on schools of architecture. A friend designed a schoolhouse in the 1960s in which each classroom was expressed by a graceful curved bay; her dean drew a large X across them, warning her, "Modern architects do not use curves.")

On the other hand, the movement also invited a certain amount of intellectual pretension. The chimney and roof gable of Venturi's Mother's House, for example, were no mere revival of traditional architectural motifs, no Shingle Style revival, but were primal elements of the house, signs of fire and shelter; they could be read as components of a complex system of signs and symbols, the study of which is semiotics. Through a strange quirk of timing, universities in the 1970s and 1980s were awash in the fashionable study of semiotics, an offshoot of linguistics, and it was inevitable that postmodern architecture was studied not so much for its specific cultural content but as a system of language. To many, it seemed, this was as ponderous a philosophical system as the one just toppled, and without the added attraction of imminent utopia.

But while postmodernism turned pretentious in the academy, it turned goofy in the streets. By the mid-1980s it had become a kind of architectural zoot suit (to use Richard Etlin's phrase), distinguished by cut-out windows, red granite stripes, and a liberal share of pastel walls. Many of the examples in Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* were drawn from America's anonymous roadside architecture, and now postmodernism returned the roadside the favor, finding in the billboards and fast-food joints of the highway strip a fountain of jaunty commercial imagery.

This process of borrowing motifs from such a diverse range of sources—from Michelangelo to McDonald's—produced a certain leveling, both literally and figuratively. After all, *Complexity and Contradiction* treated architecture in essentially two-dimensional terms, reproducing diagrams of palace and church façades schematically to show their wonderfully complex geometry.

*Architecture without a belief system is but a mechanical art, differing only from plumbing in its complexity and in being subject to certain cyclical oscillations in fashion.*

The buildings inspired by Venturi's book likewise tended to the two-dimensional and schematic, their façades serving as mere billboards. The act of designing a building came to resemble the work of a graphic



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designer rather than a sculptor. For commercial buildings, which need to swagger and strut and catch the viewer's eye, this did not matter much, but as complete architecture—fully realized in its tactile, plastic, and sculptural dimensions—it fell short. It is ironic that this movement that faulted modernism for impoverishing architecture did a good bit of impoverishing itself.

As this occurred, and as postmodernism became tainted by its association with the crassness of commerce, it was quickly disavowed by the leading schools of architecture. By the mid-1980s, postmodern buildings were seen as the architectural manifestation of the "decade of greed," of "Ronald Reagan's America," and prominent commercial architects such as Michael Graves and Helmut Jahn were scorned for their frivolity and envied for their success. Their unabashedly commercial practices were contrasted unfavorably with those earlier modernists who had specialized in social housing projects. That it was precisely the disastrous failure of these same social housing projects that had helped bring about postmodernism in the first place was conveniently forgotten.

*For all its lofty rhetoric, Postmodernism amounted to little more than a thoroughgoing fashion makeover, giving modernism a new suit of clothes and the fixed knowing wink it has worn ever since.*

To some extent, the charge of frivolity was justified. Although postmodernists cheerfully ransacked the past for usable form, much like Palladio of the Wastepaper Basket, they did so without reference to their original meanings, or the historical circumstances of their birth. Their cut-out porticos did not represent, for example, the majesty of Roman law and their great curved atria, such as Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans, had no connection to counterreformation theology. (The examples were invariably taken from classicism; Gothic architecture was not included in the general rehabilitation of historical styles, perhaps because the playful sensibility of postmodernism worked better against a strict formal system such as classicism).

If postmodernism was playful, it was not insincere, for it never pretended to seek a revival of the historical styles.[2] The forms it quoted and paraphrased it held at a distance, with the wry detachment of the Pop artist, not recreations but "ironic references." As a foundation on which to revive a style, let alone bring another one into existence, irony is no Gibraltar. But the creation of an authentic new style was never in the cards. The great architectural styles of the past, Roman or Gothic, or modernism for that matter, arose with a new structural principle or new social order—and usually both. Postmodernism offered neither, beyond what modernism had already created. The postmodern revolution tended to touch only the visible surface of the building, the thin cladding atop the steel frame, which exchanged its glass curtain wall for a festive skin of stripes, cutouts, and polished stone panels. For all its lofty rhetoric, it amounted to little more than a thoroughgoing fashion makeover, giving modernism a new suit of clothes and the fixed knowing wink it has worn ever since.

The ultimate meaning of every building is that conveyed by the society that produces it. Of all the arts, architecture is most fully a

2 In fact, within the postmodernist camp only one quixotic band has used classicism with a straight face. There were the new classicists, also known affectionately as the *young fogeys*, including such architects as Thomas Gordon Smith who made the school of architecture at Notre Dame a center of modern classicism. With the support of Henry Hope Reed and his organization Classical America, they have played an important role in championing classicism as a valuable cultural heritage rather than a set of stuffy, if amusing, forms to make sport of.



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social act. The making of a novel, a symphony, or a painting occurs in private, but a building is the product of a complex collaboration between designer, builder and client, involving the expenditure of capital, and insertion of permanent objects in the social space of the community. And whether it represents Communism or Christianity, Roman *civitas* or the Greek *polis*, every building in the end is the concrete manifestation of a belief system. For an architecture without a belief system is but a mechanical art, differing only from plumbing in its complexity and in being subject to certain cyclical oscillations in fashion.

Postmodernism, for all its charms, was not a belief system; modernism, for all its faults, was—and in many ways an attractive one. It certainly had the merit of completeness. It took upon itself the responsibility of providing for everything, its purview reaching from a building's smallest detail to the most spacious aspect of a city. This imperative to transform architecture to meet the demands of the modern world, functional and psychological, gave it an enormous sense of responsibility, which it did not shirk. Nothing like this belief system has emerged in the collapse of modernism, and certainly not the belief system that preceded it: the liberal and modern version of western culture as it emerged from the nineteenth century. Without a confident and self-assured civilization to give it direction from without, architecture was left to fend for itself from within. In place of a comprehensive belief system, it came up with that internal surrogate: theory.

During the 1970s, history made its way back into the academy but now in the form of a professor of history and theory, often of continental pedigree. It was his task to lend the content-free and relatively straightforward process of teaching students to design a certain *gravitas* (although in some cases, *levitas* might be more to the mark). His was a tall order: to replace the void left by the heroic imperative of modernism, or of belief in western civilization itself, and to do so with nothing more than some speculation about the fundamental ambiguity of signs and symbols. Of course, some theorists have aimed at goals higher than cant. Those who have, like David Leatherbarrow at the University of Pennsylvania and Karsten Harries at Yale, tend to teach architecture from the point of view of decorum, as a cultured art with a long accumulated tradition of rules and customs, with which any aspiring designer must be acquainted. It is by no means the worst approach to teaching young architects: if one does not believe in something, one can at least be literate.

Of course architecture students are not foolish, and they quickly observe that the intellectual and theoretical models in these courses are usually superfluous to the process of learning how to design (although in a pinch they might provide a flashy bit of window dressing in a crit). Those who avidly study theory are typically those who themselves aspire to teach it, who are often foreign students who will later teach in their home countries. Students during the 1990s came to have far more pressing concerns than rarefied continental philosophy, such as the harnessing of the computer and CAD (computer-aided design) in the design process. The architectural student at the end of the century was spending far less time reading treatises and writing essays than his predecessor even a decade earlier.

One of the chief reasons for the indifference to architectural theory is that theory is irrelevant to the element of competition—one might almost say Darwinian struggle—that animates architecture in a capitalist society. It is regrettable that theory has not confronted the fact of competition foursquare, for it is the cauldron of America's most interesting architecture. It is there where new technologies are forged and new forms introduced; these are the most conspicuous buildings, the ones with the largest budgets on the most prominent sites. Of course jostling aggressive competition roils the suburban street as well, where architecture serves the exaggerated descriptive role it always assumes in a nation with an elastic



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class system. While European architecture has a long tradition as a polite and urbane art, working within a settled social order, the American building invariably seeks to differentiate and distinguish itself. The polite ensemble is not an American strength.

For these reasons, America's bouts of greatest innovation and originality invariably coincide with the most overheated financial booms: the post-Civil War boom produced the aggressive Victorian generation, including Frank Furness and those inventors of the commercial skyscraper, Louis Sullivan and John Wellborn Root; the 1920s boom created the peerless inventor of skyscrapers, Raymond Hood; and even the much lamented 1980s brought Michael Graves and Charles Moore to the fore. The decades of "greed" have been kind to architecture.

While this was proceeding apace, one group of architects clung stalwartly to the great modernist cause. These were the Whites, so designated in the early 1970s for their uncompromising quest for purity (in contrast to the omnivorous eclectics of postmodernism, who were termed the Grays). Emulating Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye and Villa Stein, they took as their point of departure the cube, whose sides they unfolded and bent as if held on invisible hinges, in an increasingly complex process of geometric manipulation and axial rotation. Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman are the best known of the Whites, the latter for the emphatically rectilinear houses he built since 1967, which he numbered sequentially (a cheeky act in a field where houses are invariably designated by the names of their clients), indicating that they were part of an experimental series.

The Whites were often congratulated for their "intellectual rigor," as if their whirling axes and colliding grids were the hard-won solution to a vexing mathematical problem. In actuality, the only variable being satisfied was the architect's own eye. At bottom arbitrary, these bent axes and fractured parallelepipeds were not Euclidean proofs but spoofs of them. Clients found all this terribly perplexing but it looked quite earnest, a serious virtue if the alternative was a lighthearted or vacuous commercial architecture. And when a billion-dollar investment was at stake, as the mighty Getty Museum in Los Angeles was, it is easy to see that mock seriousness would trump playful irony—and a modernist like Meier would win the commission.

Several years ago I debated with some colleagues about what our students really ought to know about American history, their own culture. I suggested that an ability to distinguish the War of 1812 from the Spanish-American War (a not uncommon mistake) was essential knowledge. A colleague disagreed, saying the Stonewall Riots were essential knowledge to her. But a more senior colleague was wiser than us both. Our duty, she said with startling concision, was not to impart a prescribed canon of core knowledge to our students, in the belief that it was necessary for cultural literacy or good citizenship; our duty was *to teach the current hot research topics in graduate programs*.

One appreciates the honesty, but also the insight. In the absence of a collective belief in culture and civilization—in which politics, art, and science are not merely detached and free-floating specializations, but also participants in an overarching hierarchical structure that relates them to things beyond themselves—no canon is possible. The specialist knows no obligation to a wider structure of things, but merely to the guild-like rules and disciplines of his own conventicle. And something like this has also happened in the past few decades to architecture, whose forms are less likely to refer to the society in which they sit but to architecture itself—its processes, preoccupations, identity. In short, it has spiraled in upon itself.

This was certainly the path of the Whites. As their geometry grew more intricate, and their axial dissections more obsessive, their buildings soon came apart literally. And



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perhaps *literarily*, for it was the French philosophical school of deconstruction, with its doctrine about the infinite elasticity of text, that designated the new movement that emerged from the Whites. Here a metaphor about architecture was borrowed by philosophy and then returned to architecture, punning on the predilection of Deconstructionist buildings to fragment and disintegrate visibly.

Perhaps the first to do so was Frank Gehry's house in Santa Monica, which conspicuously unpeeled itself in 1978. Even more unruly was Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Visual Arts, in Columbus, Ohio (1983–1989), with its hanging column supporting nothing, a brick arch cleanly sliced in mid-curve, and its flight of stairs leading to a dead end. Here was architecture's irrational dream of itself, as Piranesi might have imagined it, although Piranesi never had the impulse to try to build his fantasies, or the capacity to coax a client into paying for them. And thus the Whites moved inexorably from upholding the ordered rationality of early modernism to a geometry of stupefying irrationality.

*It is difficult to imagine a place in the world less suited for theory than the aching chasm of Ground Zero.*

If Deconstruction strove mightily to challenge the architectural establishment, it failed. Since weathering the fall of modernism, that establishment has been more or less impervious to shock or scandal. In the schools and in the streets, architects of wildly differing stylistic orientations worked happily alongside one another; nothing was mutually exclusive. Festive postmodern towers rose cheek to jowl beside sleek black cubes with dark tinted windows, much as Gothic and Art Deco skyscrapers huddled gregariously in the 1920s. It was true that there was no single unified style that uniquely expressed the Zeitgeist, but it was not missed. Architecture had settled into an anti-heroic stance, which frowned on absolutes and definitives and endorsed pluralism, grazing omnivorously and pleasantly from the bouquet of offerings to the mild background drone of theory. So architecture ambled on, chartless but content, into the morning of September 11, 2001.

It is difficult to imagine a place in the world less suited for theory than the aching chasm of Ground Zero. Theory by nature is speculative and provisional, and the World Trade Center Site needed much stronger medicine than speculation or ironic detachment. And yet in the months following the attacks, as New York began to consider rebuilding the towers of the destroyed World Trade Center, it became clear that contemporary architecture had little else to offer. The rapidly organized exhibition of proposals at Max Protech Gallery in the late fall of 2001 was a warning of things to come, an anarchic pageant of Pop Art gestures in the Claes Oldenburg mode, or mournful earthen mounds.

To the acute embarrassment of the architectural establishment, the attacks of September 11 had an explicit national content. The International Style had effectively abolished national identity as a criterion in architecture, a state of affairs not changed by modernism's failure; certainly postmodernism, which blithely appropriated every symbol without regard for its original context, had no nationalist content. Yet the hijackers who plunged their jets into the World Trade Center towers attacked them not in their architectural or even financial capacity but in their role as emblems of American identity, which they have since become, indelibly, in retrospect.

To replace these towers without taking this into account simply would not do. Here was a commission of clear and unmistakable national importance, perhaps the most in half a century or more. But here, alas, all the factors that had transformed the nature of American architecture since the fall of modernism came into play: the



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freewheeling and noncommittal eclecticism; the two-tiered system of celebrity architects and mere practitioners; and the abdication by society at large of fundamental questions about the meaning of architecture to the architectural establishment itself—they came into play and converged catastrophically. The result was an incoherent program and the selection of a wildly inappropriate architect.

One of the unappreciated benefits of having a unified style is that the process of competition and comparison serves as a constant spur to improvement and correction. In the absence of such a yardstick, the intelligent and well-meaning building committee has no recourse but to turn to the architectural establishment for guidance.

*Such is the fragility of the American architectural tradition. The same ability to respond instantly and cleverly to commercial pressures . . . is the source of a persistent chronic rootlessness.*

It is not surprising that the winner was that impeccably credentialed product of the establishment, fifty-seven-year-old Daniel Libeskind.

And Libeskind's credentials were indeed impeccable. His career had been spent largely as a professor of architecture, who only began to receive commissions in the past decade, and almost entirely from institutional clients. His principal work, his Jewish Museum in Berlin, was presumably a qualification for World Trade Center project. After all, until now it was perhaps the world's most visible object consecrated to grief and mourning. This was a Deconstructionist essay, a compressed and bleak procession through a series of irrational and disorienting gestures. In terms of invoking chaos and irrationality, as a mighty spasm of nihilistic despair, it worked well enough. But nihilism is not the proper tone at Ground Zero, especially when the events set in train on September 11, 2001, are still unfolding turbulently around us.

It is a truism in architecture that when the client is weak or divided, the architect fills the void. This is the case at the World Trade Center, where the lease-holder Larry Silverstein was nominally the client, but where his power was offset by the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, a group finely tuned to public pressure groups. They faced two possible courses of action for Ground Zero, both of them honorable. On the one hand, one might rebuild the towers (or something like them) as quickly as possible as a mighty symbol of defiance and determination. On the other hand, one might plausibly argue that this land had forever been rendered "hallowed ground," akin to the battlefields of Gettysburg or Omaha Beach. To choose between these opposite and irreconcilable options was the responsibility of the client, but this was not done. Instead the decision was relegated to Libeskind, who has tried to have it both ways.

Libeskind placed a mantle of commercial buildings, splintered and fractured in his characteristic way, to the north of the site, leaving the pit of Ground Zero open, its rough concrete slurry wall still intact as a visible vestige of the attack and the subsequent heartrending cleaning operation. He was not commissioned to design a formal memorial—for this a separate competition was conducted during the summer of 2003, and its results not announced as of this writing—but in fact designed several, including the 1,776-foot tower that was to rise over the site and the so-called "wedge of Light" at the northern edge of the pit, which was to be bathed in sunlight on the anniversary during the precise duration of the attack and collapse of the buildings. The result is a design of tragic incoherence, simultaneously swaggering and weeping, unable to resolve its display of commercial



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vigor at the skyline and a ghoulish obsession with the yawning pit below.

Shortly after Libeskind won the commission, some of his published poetry surfaced, in which nihilism and scatological imagery play a conspicuous part. In his oft-quoted line, "America turns its mass-produced urine antennae toward Caesar's arrogant ganglion, while history is advocated by utopians as a substitute for defecating." This is absurdist, stream-of-consciousness poetry, not to be taken literally. But the train of thought has its own implicit logic. The references to America, to mass-production, and to arrogance, are not random: they are all of a piece, and suggest a vision of his adopted homeland rather different from that of the grateful immigrant.

For this Libeskind should not be blamed. Anyone casting more than a cursory look into his resume would have noticed that he was fundamentally a philosophical prankster, a creature of the theoretical compound, in which he has thrived, but constitutionally unable to relate that compound to things larger than itself—like America. And when he has tried, as with his memorial tower, the result has been kitsch, the simplistic symbolism of its 1776 exposing his non-Euclidean geometry as simple arithmetic. And with his willingness to plunge into bathos and kitsch, he proved himself another Palladio of the Wastepaper Basket.

This is the paradox of American architecture today—overwhelming technical prowess and boldness of swagger and gesture, but with a fundamental uncertainty about the ultimate meaning of things. But this is nothing new. American architecture remains a provincial enterprise, haunted by its psychological dependence on Europe. Although technically unsurpassed and although quivering with commercial vitality, it lacks that natural and unaffected sense of self that characterizes the architectural traditions of Europe. Hence the persistent American willingness to abandon its own lines of development and radically reorient itself almost overnight to European currents. The massive realignment toward European modernism in the 1930s was not a unique event. Something similar happened in the 1890s, when America abandoned the promising direction of its Chicago-style skyscrapers, Richardsonian Romanesque civic buildings, and Shingle Style Houses—each a creation of great originality and merit—and tossed them all overboard in a matter of a few years in a national fad for French classicism, the academic version taught at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. An entire living architectural culture was displaced in a matter of a few years by the doctrine of Paris. The Beaux-Arts revival produced much that was great, including most of our finest civic buildings, but it had about it a certain cold archaeology. Long-lived Frank Lloyd Wright twice experienced the abrupt and convulsive abandonment of indigenous American lines of architectural development, in his twenties during the 1890s, and in his sixties during the 1940s; it is no wonder that he was so dyspeptic in later years.

Such is the fragility of the American architectural tradition. The same ability to respond instantly and cleverly to commercial pressures, uninhibited by tradition or academic institutions, is the source of a persistent chronic rootlessness—as Macaulay said of the English constitution: all sail, no anchor. Before Modernism, the meaning of architecture was provided by settled traditions of decorum, custom, and above all belief that architecture was a high and noble art that did more than fill the mundane need for space and shelter, making civilization itself visible in permanent form. Until we can do this again, we cannot reassemble the broken pieces at Ground Zero, much less restore the void at the center of architecture. We seem able to make objects that proclaim "we suffer," "we mourn," or "we repent"—but not ones that convey the simple assertion "we are good." And a culture that cannot say that will build no pyramids or cathedrals, and in the end not even a very good house.



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# A conversation with William Bailey

## *by William Bailey & Mark Strand*

*Editor's note: In Chicago this fall, the poet Mark Strand interviewed the figurative painter William Bailey about the genesis and direction of his art.*

MARK STRAND: What was the art like in the late sixties and seventies when you were first showing in New York?

WILLIAM BAILEY: Many different things were happening—there was pop art, conceptual art, and minimal art, photo realism had started out, and there was the beginning of some recognition of straight figurative painting—that is, painting that isn't based on photography, but is based either on direct observation or memory. Around that time, in the late sixties, Gabriel Laderman wrote an article called "Unconventional Realists" in *Artforum*, and he identified a group, which was really not a group at all, but some painters that he was aware of, who were working figuratively. At the same time, Sidney Tillim had organized a realist show (which I was not in) and had also written some pieces for *Artforum*, which I thought were very interesting and on the mark. In '68, I had my first show at Robert Shoelkopf Gallery. I was teaching at Indiana at the time. And I had been away in Paris for a year on a Guggenheim. I'd known Shoelkopf years before, when he was a graduate student at Yale. And I'd seen him a couple of times but hadn't really thought of his gallery. I was, at the time, with the Stable Gallery, that was showing work which was not at all close to what I was doing. Eleanor Ward, who ran the Stable Gallery, asked me to join the gallery, but then I never had a show there. And when I asked her about having one, she said, "timing is everything. I think we should wait."

So I waited a couple of years and nothing happened, then I started looking elsewhere and Shoelkopf's name came up. I sent him a bunch of black-and-white photographs of paintings at the suggestion of Leland Bell. And Shoelkopf wrote back, offering me a show, just like that. And so in 1968 I had my first New York show at Robert Shoelkopf. I was very fortunate in that that show was seen by a lot of figurative painters, and Hilton Kramer reviewed it in *The New York Times*, which was terrifically important in getting people into the gallery. About this time, the Figurative Alliance was organized; it was a group of artists who were involved in figurative painting from various points of view. Various people were invited to speak. It was very general and pretty rowdy and some of us felt we needed a smaller group to have more serious discussion of issues, so we started a smaller group that met at Chinese restaurants while it lasted. As I recall, it was made up of Tillim and Laderman and Pearlstein and Alfred Leslie and Richard Miller. Miller's wife was an expert on Chinese food, so we went to a different restaurant for each meeting. The trouble is we talked more about food and the group sort of dissolved after a short while.



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Actually, it dissolved after an encounter between Leland Bell and Lennart Anderson. Lennart and Leland had been invited to join this small splinter group and Lennart said something about Degas. Whereupon Bell said, "I thought we were going to discuss painters." And Lennart was outraged, and he left and we had no more meetings. No. As a matter of fact the group did meet again but in a larger format with some younger painters. But that didn't last very long either, because the older painters acted, more or less, as teachers, and the younger ones as students, and neither side was comfortable with that relationship. Most of the time, I'd have to say I felt rather isolated and alone.

MS: How did the realists you were associated with identify themselves in relation to the realists of the past, or did they just think of themselves as apart from color field, pop, minimalism . . .
WB: I think that we were all up to very different things. Phillip Pearlstein was using figuration as a way of painting large, dynamic paintings that could compete with the abstract paintings of the time.

MS: And when you say "compete with," what do you mean?
WB: Compete visually—in terms of their strength on the wall. Their "initial impact" is the way I would put it. They were not slow paintings, but fast paintings, in terms of the way they were read.

MS: What about yourself?
WB: I came at it from a different perspective. I had two important influences—early de Kooning, and then Gorky. And of course Picasso. And from them, back to Ingres. And from Ingres, back to Raphael. I wanted to place a figure in a context outside of time, that is, in a more abstract context. The other thing that I was aspiring toward was something that I'd found in Southeast Asia when I was there, and that was the idea of a slowed down, slowly unfolding image, where the gesture, the attitude, were clear, but had no particular narrative importance. I wanted to paint in a way that the painter, the "I," disappeared into the work, rather than having the work show my own skill or bravura or whatever. I felt strongly, and still do, that it should be the work that speaks, and not the painter.

MS: How about yourself in relation to previous realisms?
WB: Well, I never saw myself as a realist. I came to figurative painting out of abstract painting, with an idea of trying to paint an abstract painting with a figure in it, which didn't work out very well. I was very influenced by Conrad Marca-Relli, and through Conrad, I was influenced by de Kooning. And I kept winding up at the same place, which was sort of up on the picture plane, where I didn't want to stop. I kept wanting to penetrate that canvas and go back into a measurable space. But at the same time, I wanted to maintain certain modern orthodoxies—that is, even though I wanted a deeper space, I wanted a space where the relationship to the picture plane was clear and every part of the painting had its own abstract integrity. I didn't want more nineteenth-century murk.

MS: How did your interest in still life come about?
WB: I remember a conversation with Marca-Relli. We were talking about purity and he said that there was "no way" you could purify an egg. And even though it was sort of beside the point, the egg image stuck in my mind and I thought, I think I'll paint a painting of an egg. So I did. And then I painted another one. And then I started a series of paintings of eggs—out-of-my-head eggs—which relieved me of the kind of tensions that I felt in doing the figure paintings. It allowed me to work more abstractly, and yet deal with some of the same issues of light and space—a very flattened, very shallow space. They were very simple paintings. And my idea, if there was an idea, had to do with the way light would change from one object to the next as you moved across the



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canvas. I would play with degrees of luminosity in a way that made the painting look as though it was realistic, but it was actually an invention. I did a lot of those egg paintings. And they led me to still life painting, even though I never liked the idea of still life painting, and hadn't thought of the egg paintings as still lives. I just added an object and pretty soon I added another and soon the objects overtook the eggs in that imagined world. The objects that I used were things that I liked the look of that didn't signify a particular time. I wanted them to be open to readings of architecture or figure or whatever. . . . I didn't want them caught in the kitchen or on a sideboard, in the sense that they were crockery being painted.

MS: Well, as you talk about these paintings, you don't talk about them as though you were a realist at all, but people looking at your painting will say, well, he's painting crockery, he's painting eggs, and clearly, they would be wrong. Do you find the distance growing between you and the rest of American painting? Or did you declare your independence at the beginning?
WB: I simply wanted to do what I wanted to do. And I didn't want my work to be determined by what a critic or a group of artists said painting should be. I will say that there was a moment in the early seventies when it looked as though there was a sort of pulling together of figurative painters, some of them realists, some of them not. The articles that I mentioned by Tillim and Laderman. . . . In 1970, Robert Hughes did a piece called "The Realist as Corn God," which featured this group of painters, *plus* painters who were a bit off in the direction of photography, although I wouldn't call either of them photorealists. I mean, Richard Estes, and Chuck Close were also featured in that Hughes piece. So there was a lot going on. And a lot of confusion. Photorealist painting, which was in full bloom in the early seventies, I thought had nothing whatsoever to do with figurative painting. It was an offshoot of pop art. And that confused a number of people and I think people are still confused about that.

MS: How would you tell somebody who was confused what to look for, what the difference was?
WB: Well, I would say one thing is obvious. And that is, if you're working flat to flat, then basically you're a copyist; you're taking your cues from something that already has been put down in two dimensions, and I don't do that. And the painters who work with landscape, or from the figure, who work directly, perceptually, don't do that. The other thing is that because of working on the flat, the subject matter's determined in large part by reflective qualities of the objects and so on. I'm not including Chuck Close in this, because what Close did and continues to do is work with the qualities of photographic data, and he's made no bones about that. . . . He's been very interested in photography, and when he's painting something, he knows that he's not painting the person, but he's painting a photograph of the person. He may speak less of that now than he did in the past, but I think it was one of the strengths of his position as a painter.

MS: What about other realists that you admire?
WB: I think Lucian Freud is a brilliant painter, one of the most important painters of our time. And I know that there's a lot of resistance to him in this country, perhaps because he's had a lot of high-end support.

MS: How do you explain his popularity?
WB: It's the intensity of his vision, his ability to articulate it. . . . He can crawl around on those English faces and up their noses and around their eyes in a way that I've never seen before, and without slowing down as a painter. I mean, his paintings are not meticulously painted as though he's describing details. It's always paint with him. And when he talks about making the paint into flesh, you can see that he believes it. He's doing it. In his best paintings.



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MS: So, would you be willing to say that figurative painting has not been totally eclipsed, that it is still vital?
WB: It is amazing to me that there are a great number of figurative painters, younger painters, who are doing good work. The trouble is, it's very hard to see it, because of the gallery system and the lock-step of museum curators and because it doesn't fit in well with the established conventions of vanguard art. In other words, if you can't put one on a wall with typical vanguard work, work having to do with irony or absurdity, works which are pretty much one-liners, then it might as well be ignored. Serious painting can tend to look awfully stodgy in that company. And in fact, that's the epithet that's always hurled at figurative painters—is that they're stodgy, conventional, traditional and so on. And I maintain that the reverse is often more the case: the adventure is not in following the commonly held notions of what's adventurous and what's exciting, but finding out for yourself where the excitement is in art. I mean, there are dull installation people, and there are smart and interesting installation people. Same is true of video people. But I think that figurative painting has taken a bad rap, because painting itself has taken a bad rap. And because technology is front and center right now. Also it is currently believed that art has to be confrontational and be concerned with social issues.

MS: That's common in all the arts. It seems that you must make it new, and newness declares itself in very extreme ways.
WB: Sometimes it does. I think in the history of art there have been times when newness shows itself very strongly and other times when it's almost invisible. Obviously, when we talk about Cubism, Cubism seemed new and *was* new. Yet if you look at the development of a painter, whose work was every bit as new, in my book a painter like Bonnard, it didn't look new and yet it was. His perceptions were new. The quality of his work, the way it unfolded, was new. It's only in that sense that newness makes any sense for me. The other thing I want to say is that in the long history of painting, we've seen—though it's said that painting is dead—that painting has survived, and it's survived because it's not a repetition of the same thing. And yet there are certain strains that feed the art of painting, and we find the same strains connecting Piero della Francesca to Philip Guston or to any number of painters. And most of the painters that I know, who I care about, are not thinking so much about what's going on in New York this season, as they are thinking about themselves in a longer continuum, in a long continuum.

MS: How do you see yourself in the long continuum?
WB: I don't know.

MS: But you think of yourself in a continuum?
WB: Yes, I do. I look at a lot of early painting and that feeds me. I feel I have a connection with them, although I'd be hard put to say exactly what it is that I take from those paintings. Something to do with care in composing, relating shapes, achieving a certain kind of light, a certain gesture or what have you.

MS: Are there certain painters that you feel are your direct antecedents? That is, in addition to the ones you mentioned earlier.
WB: Well, there are. But it's a very broad group. And some of them who I feel strongly about, one might have trouble relating their work to my own. If I start with the most modern painters, I would say that Mondrian has been very important to me. Matisse, very important. From Matisse back to Cézanne. But not in the sense of direct influence—the way they painted and the way I want to paint—but something else, something about what they were trying for, and something about—in the case of Matisse, of course—the thing that I admire most of all in Matisse is light, color as light. And going on back, I could talk about, you know, Chardin. I could talk



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about Ingres. The Italians—certainly Piero. It's just as soon as I start naming names, I know that I'm leaving out ten for every one that I name.

MS: In what ways do you think your painting is different from *any* painting that's come before it?
WB: Well, because I am different from anyone—but I'm also, in many ways, the same. As we all are. What's different about my painting is that I paint almost exclusively from my imagination, or my memory. And that's certainly outside the tradition of still life painting.

MS: When you say out of your imagination—you have objects in your studio, which are the objects you paint?
WB: I have them in my studio—but some of the time I'm painting those that are in my studio in Italy when I'm here. It's just that I know them well and I use them as characters in my paintings.

MS: So they're characters?
WB: They're characters. They're like a repertoire company and they take different roles in different paintings. And I add new ones every now and then, and I drop old ones, but some of them persist all the way through—they have a role that I understand. If I were a geometric abstractionist, I might say, I have preference for certain shapes, I have a preference for certain colors, certain lines. And so it is in these imagined objects. I just found that imagining objects gave me a firmer grasp of something to paint than painting rectangles and triangles or whatever.

MS: What about painting the figure? How are the problems markedly different?
WB: The problems are very different painting the figure, because you can't escape the fact that you're dealing with another human being. And that may not be the first issue, but it's one that you can't get away from. So that even if you talk about monumentality and volumes fitting together and certain formal aspects of figurative painting, you still can't escape the fact that before you there is a woman who's standing, sitting, smiling, frowning, etc. But I have no desire to animate figures in a way to show that they belong to some sort of narrative. The figures that I've done always are part of a world, the world of the studio. And, so, in that sense, they're always models. But they're always imagined, as well. It's very hard for me to talk about them, except to say that the problems are those of maintaining a particular kind of presence and sense of place—occupied place . . .

MS: But you don't paint from the model.
WB: No. No. I make up the model. Sometimes the model will resemble a model that I've used in drawing, although I never—or almost never—paint from the drawings. As I almost never paint the figure from the model, although there have been times when I've done that. But they're rare times. And when they occur, most of the painting is done without the model anyway.

MS: But you *do* a lot of drawing.
WB: Drawing's very important to me, because drawing challenges me in a way that nothing else does. Drawing is putting together, forming something with minimal means, so that the paper itself is an open space, and the marks on the paper are not so much drawing something on top, as pulling something out of the page. I'm not talking about everyone's drawings—I'm only talking about my own and my own feeling about what I'm doing when I'm drawing. That, and just the period of observation, without the idea that it has to be something, in the sense that a painting has to be a work of art. In drawing, it's the experience. But, then if I think about it a lot, or if I think about it even a little bit, painting's the same thing for me—it's the experience of painting. The world that one enters when one is drawing or painting has been important to me, more important to me than the creation of works.



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MS: Could you say something about how you think your painting has changed over the years?
WB: For one thing, I've been less concerned about the modernity of the paintings. That is to say, I've been willing to make the space deeper, where I want. I've become more preoccupied with light and with the way things look than I was in the beginning. And, certainly the figure paintings are closer to seeming natural than the earlier paintings, which were quite stylized, I felt, in relationship to the surrounding space.

MS: But there's still no attempt—in your figure painting, say—to mistake them for actual figures.
WB: Well, yes and no. I'm not trying to make real people there. But to me, they are real people, so there is a bit of a paradox.

MS: It's probably impossible to track how one's work has changed, because one doesn't usually keep close tabs on himself or herself. But the art world certainly has changed.
WB: It has. It has. When I think back on the early days at the Shoelkopf Gallery. . . . But first I have to say what was going on there. Robert Shoelkopf was an unusual dealer in that in the galleries he showed, quite often, work of contemporary figurative painters. And in the back room, he had treasures of nineteenth-century photographs or painting or twentieth-century modernist painters—like Joseph Stella or John Storrs. Photographs by Walker Evans and Cartier-Bresson. He was a very quiet, very cultivated, funny, interesting man with a fairly ironic view of the art world. More friend than dealer. I don't think he sold contemporary art very well—the story that went around among the artists in the gallery was that it was the back room that kept the gallery open. But he showed *all* of us, whether we sold or not—year after year. There was an integrity to his position in the art world that I think a wide circle of people admired. Other dealers, artists who were not even in the gallery, and certainly many of the artists in the gallery—most of them—felt very strongly that Bob was a special and an extraordinary individual in the modern art world, or in the New York art world. But it wasn't until Jane Shoelkopf started to work at the gallery full time, in the seventies, that the gallery started really making its way in a financial sense. Unfortunately, Robert died in '91, after the gallery had moved to West Fifty-Seventh Street in '83, and in '91 Jane decided to close the gallery, because she knew that it wouldn't be the same gallery anymore. She was very helpful in placing the artists in other galleries, and I know that she made an effort for everyone, in that sense. And it was with Jane's help that I moved on to the André Emmerich Gallery.

MS: Where do you think things are going? What kind of situation are we in now in the art world? Is it just a free for all? Do you see figurative painting continuing?
WB: I'm not so concerned about figurative painting. I think if painting continues, figurative painting will continue. I guess the thing that bothers me most about the time that we live in is that there are probably fewer and fewer people who can see painting. I'm thinking of what's happened in art history programs and art schools, where one commonly sees posts advertised for someone who can teach "drawing, painting, lithography, video, installation and is qualified to do things on computers." And it's also giving way to theory. Many university art departments, when they have positions that become available through attrition, go to theorists rather than visual artists. But who knows? I think we've been through lots of bad times. I think the country's in a bad state right now, so I don't think the art world is any worse off than any of the rest of us.



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# In the kitchen of art

## *by Marco Grassi*

Ernst van de Wetering, the Dutch art historian, recently remarked, perhaps only partly in jest, that in today's world a few thousand people earn their living touching works of art while earnestly preventing untold thousands of others from doing just that. This tiny minority of which van de Wetering speaks is busy, in museums and ateliers all over the world, in what Bernard Berenson with a tinge of contempt called "the kitchen of art." He meant by this to describe that murky backstage frequented by scholars, technicians, and craftsmen where the pulleys, gears, curtains, and props of the art world are manipulated. "BB," for one, was profoundly suspicious. Regarded more benevolently, this "off limits" terrain is generally known as the "restoration studio" or, alternatively, as the "conservation laboratory." These two terms, though usually describing settings that are quite similar, refer, in fact, to very different traditions. A brief backward glance will illustrate this.

There is ample evidence that the specificity and singularity of certain man-made objects bearing artistic meaning have been recognized as being worthy of conservation since remotest antiquity. The need to preserve and maintain the special characteristics as they are represented in a "work of art" is already clearly evident in an account of the elder Pliny. He recounts how a painting by Aristeides of Thebes, a contemporary of Apelles, representing "A Tragic Actor and a Boy," "was ruined through the ignorance of the painter to whom Marcus Junius as praetor [*c.* 25 BC] entrusted it to be cleaned before the games of Apollo."

The desire to intervene, when necessary, to preserve artistic patrimony runs uninterrupted through mediaeval times, becomes ever more compelling during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and finally, and not surprisingly, emerges full-blown in the Age of Enlightenment. Until the mid-eighteenth century one finds that it was practicing creative artists who, almost invariably, were charged with intervening upon the handiwork of their predecessors and fellow-artists: Duccio revising Guido da Siena (in the Palazzo Pubblico *Madonna*), Cellini completing a fragment from the antique (the *Ganymede*), Vasari reinventing the Palazzo Vecchio (the "Sala dei Cinquecento"); the list is endless . . . and the results occasionally disastrous. What is surprising, however, when compared to the often disturbing visual testimony, is that when a *written* record survives, whether in correspondence, contracts, memoirs, or the like, the level of artistic (as opposed to art-historical) awareness and perception is of a very high order indeed. It is a discourse occurring between artist and artist or between artist and patron, each perfectly cognizant of the responsibilities and implications of their undertaking. These concerns were shared not only within the confines of the princely or ecclesiastical courts of Europe



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but also in the most serene Venetian Republic. Here, the resourceful and energetic Pietro Edwards, an Italian of English descent, was, by 1778, in charge of the Republic's "public paintings," drawing up inventories, ordering surveys, and supervising restoration campaigns. He is, in every way, a new figure in the scheme of things: neither artist nor patron but a knowledgeable connoisseur in public service—the prototype of the modern curator. France in this same period saw the emergence of yet another novelty, the "professional" restorer. It was, in fact, during the waning decades of the *ancien régime* that several enterprising and hugely egocentric craftsmen developed transfer and lining techniques that were to put some of the Crown's greatest masterpieces at unconscionable risk. Not painters by training, the Hacquins, *père et fils*, the Picaults, *père et fils*, the widow Godefroid, to mention the most prominent, plied their trade well into the museum age, each promoting his or her own special and very secret techniques. This coincided roughly with the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Musée National (later Musée Napoléon, and later still, Musée du Louvre). It was the first public gallery to open its doors, and although artists of the stature of Jacques Louis David were still very much involved in the new enterprise, the museum consecrated the roles of restorer, curator, and administrator. The "kitchen of art" is born.

Unlike other institutions—hospitals, universities, libraries—whose origins can boast roots dating back centuries, the museum is a "new" invention. Its growth and development, through the course of the nineteenth century, was conditioned by a mixture of local traditions, expediency, and idealism. Restoration remained a craft practiced by independent, secretive private entrepreneurs who were able to maintain a delicate balance between their private and public clientele. It was only in 1888 that a museum (Berlin) established the first in-house studio. Art history, meanwhile, was no less a newcomer to the academic landscape. Indeed, until the early years of the last century all the activities connected to the care, study, and administration of art objects were dispatched in a somewhat ad-hoc manner by cultured, well-intentioned, and generally quite talented amateurs posing as professionals—updated versions of Pietro Edwards. Though not necessarily trained in the art academies, they continued to maintain close ties with artists and the creative environment. The world of collecting and dealing was also very much part of this milieu, for it was during the nineteenth century that the private demand for art and its consumption assumed gigantic proportions as the princely collections began to be dispersed.

At this juncture we again meet Mr. Berenson, one of the first, and surely one of the most gifted, practitioners of the new art historical discipline. Pursuing his inquiries as much on research as on perception, his method can be described in one word: connoisseurship. As he himself admirably put it: "connoisseurship . . . proceeds, as scientific research always does, by the isolation of characteristics of the known and their confrontation with the unknown."

Not long after this was written in 1902, Alois Riegel theorized about the nature of artistic "monuments" (including for the first time all manner of art works in this category). Riegel deals with artistic value, defining it in its various manifestations. Yet he adds to his analysis a very important, perhaps the most important ingredient: historical value. This concept, having almost nothing to do with connoisseurship, is a clear signal that the intellectual paths to be traveled by Messrs. Berenson and Riegel and their followers would progressively diverge. It can reasonably be argued that the advances of art history through the last century—and they have been prodigious—were conditioned by the dynamic juxtaposition of these contrasting poles, the one weighted by its concern over stylistic, formal, and aesthetic issues, and the other centered on questions of contextual, his-



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torical interpretation. Not, of course, in the sense of being contradictory or mutually exclusive, but rather as two sides of the same coin. Inexorably, however, the currency of "history" soon overshadowed the values of "art." This was, after all, the dawn of the new century and the practitioners of the new art historical discipline were still in search of legitimacy. What Mr. Berenson stood for was an interpretative pursuit based primarily on intuition, talent, perception, and honed on relentless visual inquiry . . . what has become known as "eye." Such an approach could not but be profoundly suspect, particularly to that growing number of "historicists" who were at last earning a respectable place in the academic sun.

A parallel evolution was occurring in the practice of restoration: the "studio" was being transformed into the "laboratory." Those generations of resourceful craftsmen who, a century earlier, had carefully wrested their practice from the hands of creative artists found themselves, by the end of the nineteenth century, on the threshold of becoming "conservators," a distinctly desirable and upwardly mobile progression. But the qualifications were now becoming far more complex and demanding: no longer was proficiency at the easel and at the work-table sufficient. The microscope, the X-ray radiograph, the spectrometer, and a host of other tools and techniques were eagerly embraced by the descendants of the Picaults and Hacquins. No longer were the esoteric secrets of the craft to be passed down from master to pupil; specialized, public institutes would freely provide the training and openly develop the parameters. The distance separating the "art" of restoration and the "science" of conservation was growing ever greater. In a century enchanted by the siren song of science and technology, restorers rushed headlong in this direction.

By the mid-1950s paintings and all manner of other works of art were being "treated" by earnest, highly trained conservation technicians clad in white smocks within the confines of carefully scrubbed, white-tiled labs where nary a sliver of daylight, nor for that matter a bit of common sense or aesthetic judgment, was allowed to penetrate. No artifact, public or private, seemed immune, and the dismal results all too often became front-page news: the brutal "cleanings" at London's National Gallery, the savage "deconstruction" of the Jarves early Italian paintings at Yale, the transformation of some celebrated fresco cycles (Piero at Arezzo and Giotto at Santa Croce) into archaeological digs . . . a long litany of undertakings often performed with the application of "modern" but wholly unsuitable materials such as plastics, fiberglass, aluminum, synthetic resins, and waxes of all stripes.

While no one today would question the fact that technology and the physical sciences must be applied to the understanding of works of art as material objects, and that this understanding will contribute to their future preservation, it is no less evident that the process is doomed to failure if the artistic identity of these objects is ignored. And indeed it was, almost programmatically.

The problem was compounded by the fact that, by mid-century, art-historical criticism was ill equipped to come to the rescue. That field had, itself, veered dramatically towards a diligent, occasionally Marxist, historicism with ever-narrowing specialist pursuits. The coin of art history was being significantly debased by the pursuit of aberrant intellectual dead-ends. Fortunately, there were brilliant exceptions: figures such as John Pope-Hennessy, Federico Zeri, and Pierre Rosenberg, to mention only three of the most influential. They and their successors were able to persevere in their staunch pursuit of the "old-fashioned" approach—the intuitive, insightful, yet rigorously philological process of reading the artistic texts placed before them. Not surprisingly, Pope-Hennessy titled the account of his life in art *Learning to Look*.

Unlike the realm of scholarship where a tradition can survive in written form, for a craft it must be handed down, master-to-pupil, within the context of a shop practice.



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The situation in the restoration studio, therefore, was particularly serious. In this most tactile and visual of tasks, manual skills and perceptive talents were not only discounted but even discouraged. There was every reason to fear that, within perhaps a generation, the evolution from craft to technology would become irreversible.

If there was a turning point in this progress it may well have occurred in 1963, when the Italian scholar and critic Cesare Brandi published *Teoria del Restauro*. It is a compendium of lectures, papers, and studies that Brandi had developed over many years, particularly as head of Rome's Istituto Centrale del Restauro. These texts, imbued with the historical idealism of Benedetto Croce, became immensely influential and can be said to have given the practice of restoration the ideological compass and programmatic equilibrium it had always lacked. The primacy of the artistic component within the object's material manifestation was definitively affirmed, and, although variously implemented in different working environments, Brandi's conceptual ground rules are now universally recognized and respected. In America, where the pendulum had swung furthest in the direction of reductive applied technology, the terrain was particularly arduous. Operators, much respected in their time, such as Murray Pease (at the Metropolitan Museum in the 1940s) and Sheldon Keck (at the Brooklyn Museum and later at Cooperstown in the 1950s) had rendered the field impervious to the thoughtful and measured approach advocated by Brandi and other Europeans. To this day, the pendulum has not entirely reversed its motion. It was surely hastened in its swing, however, by the arrival to these shores of Andrea Rothe who, about twenty-five years ago, took the helm of the paintings conservation department at the nascent J. Paul Getty Museum, then in Malibu. Rothe had trained in Florence and fully partook of that city's humanistic and artisan traditions. He was followed at the Metropolitan Museum, in a similar position, by the late John Brialey who had previously presided over a thriving private practice in London. Exploiting their very visible pulpits, Rothe and Brialey were not just eloquent advocates, they also presided over the intellectual formation and training of scores of younger talents. The changes—surely for the better—that they have set in motion have been profound.

The restoration profession marked a further important milestone in 1980, and by a remarkable historical coincidence it was again in Rome. That year the Vatican authorities began what was surely to be the most significant conservation project of the century: the Sistine Chapel. In a novel arrangement, the immense costs were to be borne by a Japanese media company in exchange for the visual rights for a number of years. Cesare Brandi's significant legacy was acknowledged by the fact that Gianluigi Colalucci, a pupil of Brandi's and a graduate of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, was named the chief restorer. Fabrizio Mancinelli, a brilliant young scholar attached to the Vatican Museums, was charged with overseeing the project and coordinating its art-historical research. This collaboration between the skilled "hand" of the restorer and the curatorial "eye" guiding its progress, had long been advocated by Brandi and others, but in the Sistine project it was implemented as never before. The Chapel was to become, on a huge scale, the model of how the best resources of traditional manual crafts, up-to-date scientific and technological tools, and scrupulous scholarly investigation can be combined—a clear lesson that such a combination can and should be equally effective in much smaller and less significant projects. In reconciling the often conflicting priorities of different disciplines, the Vatican undertaking will remain a paragon of achievement in the field of restoration. However, despite the spectacular results obtained in the Sistine project, paradoxically it became the object of fierce world-wide criticism. The fame of the monument itself may have partly contributed to this attention, but certainly the



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premature publication of the dramatic cleaning "tests" was particularly ill conceived.

Naturally, it was in the interest of the Japanese sponsors to begin recouping their investment as quickly as possible. The problem, of which all the responsible authorities should have been well aware, is that photographic emulsions, no matter how sophisticated, can never render faithfully the correct tonal rapport between two adjacent areas of differing brightness: the "clean" will inevitably appear faded and thin, the "dirty" as saturated and dark. Film simply does not possess the exposure latitude to compensate for such differences. The hugely contrasted images that appeared in every magazine shocked even the more informed observers . . . yet another cleaning controversy was upon us! In reality, and justifiably, never had greater care and sensitivity been lavished on painted images. No one who was accorded the privilege of visiting the workplace atop the scaffolding and of examining Michelangelo's miraculous surfaces with the far more sensitive lens of the human eye could doubt that what had survived the centuries had been preserved intact. Fortunately, the Vatican's own counter-offensive on behalf of the project and the more measured and responsible assessment by the specialist community has, in time, blunted much of the ill-advised earlier criticism.

Can we, then, feel confident that order and sanity have at last returned to the kitchen of art? Are the artistic priorities that served as guideposts to generations of scholars and restorers still considered valid for the understanding and conservation of our cultural heritage? The answer is . . . yes and no. *Yes* to the extent that we are still from time to time treated to events such as the recent Gentileschi or the present El Greco exhibitions at the Metropolitan. These remarkable undertakings, combining the talents of curators and restorers, exemplify the levels of quality that can be achieved—in scholarship, research connoisseurship, and presentation, when the noblest traditions of their individual pursuits are respected with intelligence, perhaps even reverence. And *no* when one realizes that the dark clouds of academic historicism and hyperspecialization continue to blur the horizon. The socioeconomic concerns of "post-modern" criticism have contributed to further debase the currency of art history. In this intellectual climate, the subject of the discourse—the artistic artifact itself—has been progressively and almost totally marginalized. Having been subverted and deprived of its intrinsic values, the work of art has, in effect, been rendered superfluous. Considered in this light, it is not surprising that a distinguished scholarly periodical was recently the host to articles such as: "Blemished Physiologies: Delacroix, Paganini, and the Cholera Epidemic of 1832" and "Two Waldorf-Astorias: Spatial Economics as Totem and Fetish." In the field of conservation, a respected journal offered: "Contribution of dust at floor level to particle deposit within the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts," wherein the authors dramatically concluded that the "study suggests visitors' shoes are an important contributor to dust loading on the floors in museums."

Served with such unappetizing dishes of *nouvelle* art inquiry, the only solution for the civilized patron will be firmly but politely to . . . send them back to the kitchen.



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# The rape of the masters

## *by Roger Kimball*

HAMLET: *Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?*
POLONIUS: *By th' mass and 'tis—like a camel indeed.*
HAMLET: *Methinks it is like a weasel.*
POLONIUS: *It is backed like a weasel.*
HAMLET: *Or like a whale.*
POLONIUS: *Very like a whale.*

*[W]here art history is concerned, in the beginning was the eye, not the word.*
—Otto Pächt

Why do we teach and study art history? A question that elicits a complicated answer. To learn about art, yes, but also to learn about the cultural setting in which art unfolds; in addition, to learn about—what to call it? "Evolution" is not quite right, neither is "progress." Possibly "development": to learn about the development of art, then, how artists "solved problems"—for example, the problem of modeling three-dimensional space on an essentially two-dimensional plane.

Those are some of the answers, or some parts of the answer, most of us would give. There are others. We teach and study art history—as we teach and study literary history or political history or the history of science—partly to familiarize ourselves with humanity's adventure in time. We expect an educated person in the West to remember what happened in 1066, to know the plot of *Hamlet*, to understand (sort of) the laws of gravity, to recognize *The Venus of Urbino* when he sees it. These are aspects of a huge common inheritance, episodes that alternately bask in and cast illuminations and shadows, the interlocking illuminations and shadows of mankind's conjuring with the world.

All this might be described as the dough, the ambient body of culture. The yeast is supplied by direct acquaintance with the subject of study: the poem or play, the mental itinerary a Galileo or Newton traveled, the actual work of art on the wall. In the case of art history, the *raison d'être*—the ultimate motive—is supplied by a direct visual encounter with great works of art. Everything else is prolegomenon or afterthought, scaffolding to support the main event, which is not so much learning *about* art as it is experiencing art first hand.

Another question: What has happened to the main event? Suppose you dropped into Art History 101 at your local college, haunted the annual meeting of the College Art Association, perused the major journals and new books devoted to art history: what would you discover? Doubtless a wide variety of things. Here and there you would find art history pursued as outlined above: as an educational endeavor concerned with genuine scholarship that aimed above all at facilitating the direct encounter with important works of art.

But the dominant trend—the drift that



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receives the limelight, the prizes, the academic adulation—is decidedly elsewhere. Today, the study of art history is more and more about subordinating art—to "theory," to politics, to just about anything that allows one to dispense with the burden of experiencing art natively, on its own terms. This is accomplished primarily by enlisting art as an illustration of some extraneous, non-artistic, non-aesthetic narrative. Increasingly, art history is pressed into battle—a battle against racism, say, or the plight of women or on behalf of social justice. Whatever. The result is that art becomes an adjunct to an agenda: an alibi for . . . you can fill in the blank by consulting this week's list of trendy causes.

In a word, what we are witnessing is the triumph of political correctness in art history. Political correctness operates by transposing life to an alien jurisdiction, judging our endeavors by the peremptory diktats of presumed virtue. It is worth stressing that the chief issue, the chief loss, lies not in the particular program being espoused: the war on patriarchy, the struggle against capitalism, the march against "formalist values" or "bourgeois ethics." Whatever one thinks of those campaigns—love them or hate them—the chief diminishment lies in the displacement of art, its relegation to the status of a prop in a drama not its own.

This generally happens in one of two ways. The first involves a process of spurious aggrandizement. You hail the mediocre as a work of genius, for example, or pretend that what is merely repellent actually beneficently transforms our understanding of art or life. If art is no longer to be judged primarily in terms of aesthetic achievement, it is vulnerable to usurpation by any importunate bandwagon: the one marked "egalitarianism" just as much as the one marked "anarchy," "opportunistic nihilism," or "fatuous revolutionary politics."

Footnote: One of the most insidious expressions of this process of *de bas en haut* involves a travesty of traditional aesthetic judgment. One thinks of those cheerleaders for Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of the sado-masochistic demimonde who pretended to admire them for their formal excellence: the exquisite triangulation of the bullwhip being reminiscent of, etc., etc. (Their sneer: "You want aesthetic appreciation? We'll give you aesthetic appreciation—of garbage.") The vocabulary of aesthetic delectation was reforged into a demonic parody of itself. The moral is that art is no more immune from perversion than any other realm of human endeavor.

Spurious aggrandizement describes one strategy in the war against art. It blurs the distinction between high and low, elevating the detritus of popular culture to the status of fine art. (Andy Warhol: "Art is what you can get away with.") The second main strategy proceeds in the opposite direction. It operates not by inflating the trivial, the mediocre, the perverse, but by attacking greatness. Sometimes the assault is direct: a moustache planted on the upper lip of the Mona Lisa. More often, it is by some strategy of indirection. The work of art is seized as an occasion for critical lucubration, for political sermonizing, for theoretical or pseudo-theoretical exegesis. Here, too, there is an element of spurious aggrandizement: of the interpreter. But for the work of art, the result is a despoliation, the rape of the masters.

In "The Authorship of *In Memoriam*," the English essayist Ronald Knox "proved" that the real author of that familiar poem was not Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as many of us have supposed, but Queen Victoria. Knox's essay is a delightful *jeu d'esprit*, an amusing poke at the poor souls who believe that Francis Bacon or the Earl of Oxford wrote the plays commonly attributed to Shakespeare. But Knox wrote with tongue in cheek. His essay is funny because it is meant as satire. Those academics who undertake the rape of the masters might be funny were they not in earnest. But earnest they are. They write to traduce, not satirize. More precisely, they poach upon the authority of art in order to pursue an entirely non-artistic agenda. Their interest in art is ulterior, not aesthetic.



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Some examples. In "Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters," an immensely influential article published in *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* (Winter 1989), Albert Boime argues that Winslow Homer's well-known painting *The Gulf Stream* (1899) "reveals [Homer's] understanding of the relationship of economics to the plight of blacks and their survival." Yes, well. The canvas portrays a lone black man struggling in rough waters on a dismasted sloop; in the distance, a storm threatens; closer to hand, a group of sharks thread through the waves. It is a powerful painting. But Professor Boime, who teaches art history at UCLA, is not interested in powerful paintings. He is interested in the plight of blacks in nineteenth-century America. So he seizes upon Homer's painting (and *Watson and the Shark* [1778] by John Singleton Copley) in order to illustrate his morality play.

Three or four stalks of sugar cane sprout from the hold of the boat in Homer's picture, jumbled tentacles that reinforce the sense of swelling visual drama. But according to Professor Boime, "Homer's conspicuous representation of the stalks, totally out of proportion to the boat and its lone passenger, assumes a symbolic and metonymic connotation in its intimate relationship to the history of slavery in the West Indies." Does it? Or is it rather the case that Professor Boime "assumes"—perhaps "imports" would be better—that "symbolic and metonymic connection"?

When some clients asked about the fate of the man pictured in the boat, Homer told his dealer that "You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate negro who is now so dazed & parboiled will be rescued & returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily." Homer's tone betrays understandable exasperation: he had offered the public a painting, not a news story. But for Professor Boime, the artist's comment justifies an additional sermonette:

> Homer's ironic tone carries with it the masculinized aura of the Victorian male who admired risk-taking situations remote from the realm of "ladies," but it also signifies the opposite of what he stated. . . . [How does Profesor Boime know this?] Homer's black man is both hero and victim, collapsing the old categories of triangular formalism into a powerfully condensed metaphor of implicit power blocked.

Maybe. Or maybe the whole idea of "collapsing the old categories of triangular formalism" was invented lock, stock, and barrel by Professor Boime, who is more concerned to declare his correct attitudes about race than to appreciate Homer's painting in its own terms. "Blacks in Shark-Infested Waters" is twenty-five closely printed pages of social history in which Winslow Homer and Copley are enlisted to support a thesis about how two "North American artists from privileged white middle-class backgrounds . . . . transmitted the attitudes of their peers toward blacks." The art is incidental.

Art is incidental for the influential English feminist Griselda Pollock, too. But she adds "gender" and sexual politics to Professor Boime's concern with race. In *Avant-Garde Gambits: Gender and the Color of Art History*, she eviscerates Paul Gauguin for supplying

> the fantasy scenarios and the exotic mise-en-scène for not only masculinist but also imperialist narratives. Gauguin, like Picasso, is regarded as a major father of modern art, a term rich in both reproductive and sexual connotations.

Thanks for that gloss on the word "father"! Would Professor Pollock be happier if Gauguin were described as "a major mother of modern art"? Note that *Avant-Garde Gambits* is no obscure piece of academic makework but rather the text of the Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures, a series that has included such eminences as Lawrence Gowing, John Pope-Hennessey, Kenneth Clark, and John Elderfield.

Professor Pollock lavishes a great deal of attention on *Manao Tupapau* (1892) (the



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title means "spirit thought"), Gauguin's famous homage to Manet's *Olympia*. The painting portrays a young Tahitian woman lying belly down, naked, on a bed, her head turned toward the viewer. Standing in the background is a spectral figure representing the spirit of the dead. In several letters, Gauguin explained that his aim in *Manao Tupapau* was partly to capture a particular harmony of color and movement and partly to communicate the woman's fear as she sensed the presence of death. A particular challenge, he said, was to portray the naked woman without suggesting "something indecent." "As soon as the idea of a *tupapau* has occurred to me, I concentrate on it and make it the theme of my picture. The nude thus becomes subordinate."

For Professor Pollock, however, *Manao Tupapau* is less a painting than an indictment. It is racist. It is sexist. It is colonialist. It is capitalist. Drawing on such figures as Franz Fanon, whose *Wretched of the Earth* is a fashionable document in the library of pro-terrorist literature, and Jacques Lacan, whose radical Freudianism has been a godsend to sex-obsessed obscurantists everywhere, Professor Pollock charges that

> [i]n Gauguin's work as it circulated in Paris, the body of Teha'amana [the woman depicted in the painting] is a fetish doubly configured through the overlapping psychic structures of sexual and racial difference. In art, as the nude, the female body is refashioned fetishistically, in order to signify the psychic lack within bourgeois masculinity which is projected out onto the image of "woman." The culturally feminized and racially othered body also carries the projected burden of the cultural lack—the *ennui*—experienced by some of the Western bourgeoisie in the face of capitalism's modernity.

Professor Pollock criticizes Gauguin (and others) for creating "an imaginary world named 'the Tropics.'" But she has populated a far more tenuous venue with her fervid imaginings. One need not be a particular fan of Gauguin's work to see that Griselda Pollock has left it far behind in her effort to disseminate (if I may use the term) her feminist gospel.

Overt political fantasy is not the only popular method by which the rape of the masters is accomplished in the academy today. There is also hermetic over-interpretation—or perhaps hermetic non-interpretation would be a more accurate description. This assault on art operates by owlishly menacing irrelevance. There are many accomplished and influential practitioners, each of whom contributes his (or her) own distinctive quotient of absurdity. For sheer preposterousness, no one can top the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In his book *The Truth in Painting* (1987), Derrida offers his readers—what a patient lot they are!—some 130 pages on Van Gogh's famous painting of a pair of peasant shoes.

The competition for the most ludicrously overinterpreted painting in the world has yet to be held. But the odds are strong that Van Gogh's little painting would win hands down. It has, after all, been the subject of a long essay by Martin Heidegger ("Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth") as well as a prolix essay by Meyer Shapiro taking issue with Heidegger. And those essays unleashed a torrent of words words words from which poor Van Gogh labors to this day.

Reading Derrida is like plunging from the sunshine into a darkened hallway hung with mirrors. It takes a while to get your bearings, and even then . . . Derrida opens his book with a section called "Passe-Partout." It's a passport to Oz. Someone tells him, "I am interested in the idiom in painting." "What," Derrida asks, "does he mean?"

> Does he mean that he is interested in the idiom "in painting," in the idiom itself, for its own sake, "in painting" (an expression that is in itself strongly idiomatic; but what is an idiom?)?
>
> That he is interested in the idiomatic expression itself, in the words "in painting"? In-



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> terested in words in painting or in the words "in painting"? Or in the words "'in painting'"?

One thing is clear: that Derrida is not interested in painting but only in "painting."

When he gets around to Van Gogh's shoes, Derrida pretends to be tormented by the "problem" of whether the shoes are really a *pair* of old shoes as Heidegger blithely assumed.

> —If the laces are loosened, the shoes are indeed detached from the feet and in themselves. But I return to my question: they are also detached, by this fact, one from the other and nothing proves that they form a pair. If I understand aright, no title says "pair of shoes" for this picture. Whereas elsewhere . . . Van Gogh speaks of another picture, specifying "*a pair* of shoes." Is it not the possibility of the "unpairedness" (two shoes for the same foot, for example, are more the double of each other but this double simultaneously fudges both pair and identity, forbids complementarity, paralyzes directionality, causes things to squint toward the devil), is it not the logic of this false parity, rather than of this false identity, which constructs this trap? The more I look at this painting, the less it looks as though it could walk.

But how about talk? The more Derrida looks at it, the more it looks as though it might talk.

Derrida is one of the most adulated, highest paid, and influential academics in the world. What does that tell us? That celebrity is a license for unbridled intellectual masturbation? In part. But it is worse than just that. Figures like Boime, Pollock, and Derrida are not *exceptions* in the world of academic art history. They and their many confrères (Svetlana Alpers on Rubens, say, or Michael Fried on Courbet, or Anna Chave on Rothko) are the academic vanguard: they define the heights of their discipline. It is they who set the trends, start the fads, shape the discipline. Graduate students emulate them. Publishers chase them. And for what? "What is disturbing about Rubens' Munich *Silenus*," Svetlana Alpers writes about the painter's *Drunken Silenus*,

> is that in it gender difference is unclear. Difference is denied, or at least not marked: the body is not clearly male, nor is it female. In appearance and in behavior he exists, on Rubens' pictorial account, in a curious no man's and no woman's land, between or eliding genders. . . .
>
> Why would a male painter in our tradition represent flesh in this manner? I think it has something to do with the problem of male generativity. How are men to be creative, to make pictures, for example, when giving birth is the prerogative of women?

Professor Alpers proceeds with some verbal embroidery about "the gaze" and "the Lacanian notion of finding oneself through being looked at," but anyone who looks at that Rubens painting can see that gender, far from being denied, is robustly proclaimed. For one thing, the tipsy, balding Silenus is heavily bearded: a subtle hint for most of us that he is male.

There is something unutterably depressing about wading through this academic gobbledegook. It's not just the rebarbative pseudo-thought, the clichéd political sloganeering ("Eurocentric patriarchal colonialist bourgeois racist capitalist"), the minatory, all-knowing tone. That's bad enough. But the tragedy of this reader-proof verbiage is that it acts as a prophylactic, effectively sealing off students from any direct contact with works of art. We turn to art history to open the door to art. More and more what we get is a *cordon insanitaire* preventing any contact with the work. In *The Practice of Art History*, the great Austrian scholar Otto Pächt argued that "where art history is concerned, in the beginning was the eye, not the word." Pächt was a passionate proponent of the idea that art was "more than a mere illustration of the humanities." It is more, too, than a mere illustration of politicized nihilism and empty theorizing. Looking at the way art history is taught today, however, you'd never know it.



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# What is strange about the Dahesh Museum?

## *by James Panero*

*There was a spiritual director, an oracle, in these parts who daily filled a famous column in one of the local newspapers. Once, in days of family piety, it bore the title* Aunt Lydia's Post Bag*; now it was* The Wisdom of the Guru Brahmin*, adorned with the photograph of a bearded and almost naked sage. To this exotic source resorted all who were in doubt or distress.*
—Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One*

Imagine yourself in a different place and time: California, let's say, late 1940s. Like many of your compatriots, you consider yourself a spiritual sort of fellow. People might call you a "new ager." Your chain of General Motors dealerships is thriving; you are a millionaire; yet something is lacking. Then a friend introduces you to a spiritual man named "Dr. Wonder." Your friend explains that Dr. Wonder eats only raw onions, olives, and cheese, he perspires profusely, yet he always smells clean. Indeed it is true! Soon enough Dr. Wonder takes you into his confidence. You learn about his philosophy: "essential spiritual fluids." Also: Dr. Wonder can remove, if necessary, his head from his body; he has six avatars that sometimes appear at once; he can walk through walls. It all sounds quite fantastic. The guru invites you to his salon with other soul-searching notables: the Christopher Isherwood/George Heard types, some rich dowagers, as well as the sister-in-law of the governor of the state. Pretty interesting company. Many of them give Dr. Wonder money. Through this, combined with his literary sales (yes, he is a prolific writer), he acquires objets d'art for his salon: china, sculpture, realistic-looking paintings that no one else wants. He collects over fifty new items a year.

By the time Dr. Wonder dies his second death, while visiting your Connecticut home in 1984, he has collected over three thousand items (much of which you purchased from him back in 1975) and has socked away fifteen million dollars. He bequeaths it all to you. Now, you already run the Dr. Wonder Publishing House, dedicated to the writings of Dr. Wonder. You decide that the best thing to do is open up a museum. So you apply for a temporary charter from the State of New York. In 1995, with the best intentions, you open a tiny, 1,800-square-foot museum on Lexington Avenue in New York City called "The Wonder Museum" next to an outfit named (can you believe this?) "The Fine Art of Hair Replacement." Not exactly Class-A stuff. Nevertheless, you hire some art professionals through the College Art Association to head the museum, and you keep them out of the family faith. You invest Dr. Wonder's money with a well-respected New York bank, let's call it Citibank. You see the assets realize, oh, $20 to $30 million. You try to purchase part of the Edward Durrell Stone-designed Huntington Hartford Museum building on Columbus Circle only to lose out first to the crafty Donald Trump



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and then to the American Craft Museum. Finally, through your real estate contacts at a well-respected New York agency like Newmark, and with a top lawyer from a firm like Paul Weiss Rifkind Warton and Garrison LLP, you land a sweetheart three-level sublease deal in the lower floors of the IBM Building on 57th Street and Madison; you employ a firm like Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates LLP for $4 million to spruce the place up with a 200-seat auditorium, a 70-seat cafe, a street-level gift shop, and 5,400 square feet of exhibition space; you hire a new curator and double the staff to forty; you list your new friends at Citibank and Paul Weiss on the roll call of trustees (although, ahem, this is still really a family operation). Then, on September 3, 2003, you watch from your thirteen-million dollar, eleven-acre estate in Greenwich, Connecticut, with nine-bedroom mansion, two-bedroom Cape Cod cottage, and three-bedroom colonial home, as the doors of your new, improved, wonderful museum open for business.

Replace California in this marvelous story with the flush, beachy environs of pre-war Lebanon, with the millions belonging to the Zahid family of Connecticut, New York, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (the Zahid family are principal board members of the Saudi-based Zahid AMECO, the Arabian Motors and Engineering Company), and you have something approaching the real-life history of an institution in New York called the Dahesh Museum of Art. This is the only New York museum, one is relentlessly reminded, dedicated to the heretofore unrealized mission of solely presenting nineteenth-century academic French art, the slick, licked, outré collecting passion of its namesake: Salim Moussa Achi, a.k.a. Dr. Dahesh.

Yet when it comes to the full history of the Dahesh Museum, perhaps no art institution in recent memory has similarly chosen to obfuscate its own founding, funding, and history of acquisition in quite the same way. What we do know has largely been uncovered through two investigative articles that appeared in *ARTnews*, the first of which brought the Daheshi religion connections to light to the consternation of its then director, J. David Farmer.[1] Farmer claimed that while he did not at first investigate the Zahid background, he and his staff had chosen to distance the history of Dr. Dahesh, a quasi-Arabic moniker meaning "Doctor Wonder" or "Doctor Amazing," from the activities of the museum. This syllogistic strategy has now been taken up by the museum's new director, the spritely young Peter Trippi.

"Very few of us at the museum know about Dr. Dahesh's life," Trippi said to *ARTnews*, "We're not deeply interested." In Trippi's defense, *ARTnews* quotes Robert Rosenblum, a professor of fine arts at New York University and a senior curator at the Guggenheim museum: "Nobody I know has ever thought about it any more than they've thought about where Henry Clay Frick's money came from. The museum's potential is as an exhibition space for the future serious study of nineteenth-century academic art. If Daheshists are willing to fund it, that's fine. Think of all of the exhibitions Philip Morris has sponsored." Or that Giorgio Armani has sponsored, one might add.

A singular source of English-language information on Dr. Dahesh has been Mounir Murad, a high-tech business owner in Virginia, an open Daheshist, and the self-published author of *Daheshism and the Journey of Life*. Murad's account of Dr. Dahesh greatly expands upon what little one finds on him at the Dahesh Museum. A wall text in the museum's Pier 1-like gift shop, beside a portrait of Dr. Dahesh, describes Dahesh's nineteenth-century Lebanese home as "a cosmopolitan and convivial salon where people of all ages gathered to exchange ideas"—not as a spiritual center. Dr. Dahesh

1 See "The Riddle of Dr. Dahesh" by Ferdinand Protzman, *ARTnews*, December 1996; and "The Dahesh Enigma" by Kelly Devine Thomas, *ARTnews*, October 2003.



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was also an advocate for "human rights," although exactly how is never made clear. Elsewhere in the bookshop, a few pages in the 1999 catalogue *Highlights from The Dahesh Museum Collection*, with an essay by Lisa Small (the curator of a current exhibition called "Reframing Academic Art" on view through February 8), echoes much of the same roundabout language. She indicates that Dr. Dahesh was once awarded an "honorary degree."

On the subject of the "honorary degree," Mounir Murad writes: "Dahesh traveled throughout the Middle East and Europe and received a certificate from the Société Psychique Internationale on May 6, 1930 and a doctorate in psychic research from the Sage Institute in Paris on May 22, 1930, for his ability to transgress the laws of nature."

And what was Dr. Dahesh's dissertation? Murad continues:

> About 10 experts in the field of supernatural studies witnessed the 20-year-old man, at his request, be placed in a casket, which was sealed and then submerged at the bottom of the Seine River for seven days under tight surveillance. After the seven-day period was over, the casket was pulled out and . . . the miracle man had a smile on his face and was in perfect health.

Murad describes other death-defying scenarios. For example, Dr. Dahesh's Lebanese oppressors, under Bechara El-Khoury, chased him from Lebanon in 1944. On July 1, 1947, Dahesh was blindfolded and executed by firing squad in Azerbaidjan, which was "photographed and documented." Yet as Dr. Dahesh had substituted one of his six "spiritual personalities" for the body of the real thing, he quickly returned to Lebanon in order to prepare "a large-scale media attack on his oppressors." Murad, with open enthusiasm for Dr. Dahesh, then concludes:

> According to the followers of Dr. Dahesh, Jews have missed Jesus Christ for the second time, and Christians and Moslems have also failed to recognize him. By now you may have guessed that Dr. Dahesh's life is regarded as the second coming of Jesus Christ.
>
> Bon voyage!

Far be it for someone in these pages to deliberate on the claims or counterclaims of the followers of Dahesh. Yet one can say that it is quite clear the Dahesh Museum will never be taken seriously as a fully accredited, scholarly institution until it confronts its own history: the record of collecting before 1995 by Dr. Dahesh and the Zahid family, the museum's funding, and the aesthetic interests behind its creator, Dr. Dahesh. Only then will the Dahesh collection be viewed in a critical way. It may be that the directors of Dahesh hope simply to brush off the doctor's heritage from the museum; or perhaps the Zahids have instructed their museum employees to keep silent on the matter. At any rate, every effort is made to separate the two. Dr. Dahesh may have been able to remove his head from his body, yet the Dahesh Museum enjoys no such luxury, and the museum's current posture towards its own history is euthanastic.

For example, when I visited the Dahesh Heritage Center, also known as the Daheshist Publishing Company, at 1775 Broadway, a representative hastily informed me that there were no books on Dr. Dahesh's history of art collecting, even though the Daheshist Publishing Company publishes only work by Dr. Dahesh (and nothing, I was told, by Mounir Murad). "Mr. James," he held up his palms, "we have nothing here for you. Yes, there is a history of Dr. Dahesh's European travels. But it is twenty-two volumes and," he smiled, "only in Arabic. You should visit the Dahesh Museum." The telephone rang and he ducked away. A short walk across 57th Street to Madison Avenue proved no more rewarding. When I asked a salesman at the Dahesh Museum gift shop if he had any books about Dr. Dahesh, he scurried off, wrote down an address on a stickie, and told me to visit the Dahesh Heritage Center. Such has been the experience of most inquirers into the history of this museum.



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So what does it all mean for academic art? With modernism's steady decline in the esteem of so many contemporary critics, scholars, and artists, it is little surprise that academic art has enjoyed something of a kitschy resurgence in the past fifteen years. Whereas romanticism, the realism of Courbet, Impressionism, and numerous other nineteenth-century side movements came together into a single understanding of modernism at the turn of the century—"modernism" as we came to know it in the twentieth century—the labored, conservative art of the French academy was really the popular and mainstream art for most of the nineteenth century. It was the French academicians who largely controlled the powerful salons as well as the Prix de Rome. When Napoleon III established the Salon des Refusés in 1863 for Cézanne, Pissarro, Guillaumin, Jongkind, Fantin-Latour, Whistler, and Manet, among others, the public reacted with scorn and ridicule. Fifty years later, the sentiment had reversed, academic art was out, although an echt-academic painter like Bouguereau was still exhibiting popular new work, such as his *Regina Angelorum*, through 1900 (he died in 1905).

Many of us were reminded of this fact by Rosenblum's important exhibition "1900: Art at the Crossroads," which he curated at the Guggenheim Museum a few years back. "1900" smartly cut right down the middle of a moment in art history, even recreating part of that year's salon from the Exposition Decennale des Beaux-Arts, in which Bouguereau appeared.

The moment when you might find many a heated partisan for the modernism-academicism debate is over. The re-inclusion of academic painters like Delaroche, Vernet, and Gérôme in the canon is all but inevitable, just as the earlier academics Ingres and David have now received their due.

It is therefore all the more surprising that the Dahesh Museum continues to champion academic art—all academic art—with a unique blend of zealous advocacy and aesthetic blindness. This can only be attributed to the connection of the museum to Dr. Dahesh and his larger-than-life reputation. If Dr. Dahesh did not enjoy the aesthetic judgment of, say, Ernst Gombrich, does this throw his other accomplishments in doubt? This is a possibility the curators of the Dahesh Museum seem eager to avoid. Compare these three Dahesh quotations:

> [M]odernism [is] a belief system which dominated much of the twentieth century, and which often reduced to mere obstacles those artists and institutions—broadly known as academic—that did not follow its trajectory. But there is another story to tell about the nineteenth century.

> [Younger people] are viewers who do not carry the "baggage" of modernist thinking about the nineteenth century and thus are open to considering all of this period's arts in a clear-eyed manner.

> Be warned that in reading this book, a high level of open-mindedness is required. If you start reading this book with the firm idea that what you currently believe in is not open to change, please proceed no further, for Daheshism and this book are not meant for you. It takes a very open-minded person to understand and appreciate the Daheshist philosophy, and even so, it may be too much for some people to handle.

Lisa Small, Peter Trippi, Mounir Murad: the rhetoric is the same. A case for academic art can be made, but it should not be a faith-based initiative. The Dahesh Museum's presentation of academic art is as dematerialized as Dr. Dahesh's Azerbaidjani avatar: no contextualization towards mainstream art history; no discrimination between Gérôme's majestic *Working in Marble* (1890) and Henri Pierre Picou's *Andromeda Chained to a Rock* (1874) (which belongs on the wall of the Yale Club taproom); no discussion of recent acquisitions compared to Dr. Dahesh's original collection (very few of his paintings seem to make it out of storage). In short, no nothing at this strange museum.



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# Romanticism at the Met

## *by Karen Wilkin*

Sex, violence, horror, period costume dramas, bucolic idylls, terrifying cataclysms of nature, and grisly recent events. No, that's not, as you might think, a list of current offerings at the movies. Rather, these are subjects that visitors were likely to encounter at the Salon in Paris or the Royal Academy in London in the 1820s and 1830s. Present-day viewers can discover them at the Metropolitan Museum of Art until the beginning of January in "Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism," organized by the Tate, London.[1] While it could be argued that in the early nineteenth century the large public exhibitions held at the Salon and the Royal Academy served many of the functions that films do now, the point of departure for the thought-provoking show at the Met is not the role of the sensational in art at the time, but the paradoxical fact that what would now be called "cultural exchanges" between Britain and France increased and intensified after Napoleon's definitive defeat by Britain and its allies in 1815. French painters immersed themselves in the works of Shakespeare, Byron, and Sir Walter Scott. Scotland became a popular destination for both French and British travelers seeking glimpses of the Sublime without the inconvenience of crossing the Alps. British painters took studios in Paris and sent their most ambitious works to be exhibited at the Salon. French painters, admittedly, rarely showed at the Royal Academy, but at least one young Parisian exhibited his most scandalous picture to date in London, to great acclaim. The result was a lively dialogue between artists from both nations. British and French painters scrutinized each other's efforts carefully, apparently weighing what an English sculptor friend calls "what they could get off of it," while critics from both sides argued the merits of each camp. Both the nature and the effect of this give-and-take is the subject of "Crossing the Channel."

By assembling some of the most discussed works seen in the most important exhibitions of the period, the show presents vivid evidence of the dominant concerns of the artists of "the age of Romanticism" and demonstrates how the desiderata of the day were embodied both similarly and differently in the work of British and French painters. The selection ranges from the celebrated to the virtually unknown, from the magnificent to the preposterous. Such notables as John Constable, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Théodore Géricault, and

1 "Crossing the Channel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism" opened at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, on October 8, 2003 and remains on view through January 4, 2004. The exhibition was previously on view at Tate Britain, London, and The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by Tate Publishing (296 pages, $60).



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Eugéne Delacroix are represented by significant, often canonical canvases. The show also has its quota of run-of-the-mill, dated, or just plain silly works by people deservedly familiar mainly to specialists, but they, too, play their part in telling the story. By turns witty, disturbing, absorbing, surprising, and fun, "Crossing the Channel" is always intelligent and informative.

At the Met, the exhibition begins by putting you at sea, metaphorically and almost literally, by confronting you with a full-sized version of Géricault's celebrated *Raft of the Medusa* (1819, Musée du Louvre)—grisly current events category—which everyone knows does not travel. It's not only disconcerting to encounter this vast, utterly familiar image somewhere other than in the Grand Galerie of the Louvre, *sans* frame, but it becomes almost immediately apparent that there's something not quite right about the picture before you. It's too bright and rough; the rigging and the threatening wave on the left are more clearly delineated, distracting you from the tiny ship on the horizon to the right and counterbalancing the terribly dead figure spilling off the pitching raft, almost at your feet. It turns out that this huge expanse of canvas is a replica, now in the Musée de Picardie, Amiens, made in 1859–1860 by two otherwise undistinguished Academicians, Pierre-Désiré Guillement and Antoine-Eugéne Ronjat, when the original started to fade.

Accompanying this surrogate are two remarkable British pictures: Turner's golden, storm-tossed *Disaster at Sea* (*c.* 1835, Tate Britain, London), a near-abstraction made explicit by a scribble of terrified figures in the waves; and a sleek, lurid, blood red and steel gray *Sunset at Sea After a Storm* (1824, Bristol Museums and Art Gallery) by Francis Danby. Together this initial grouping states some of the period's—and the exhibition's—principal themes. All of these images aim at roiling your feelings by turning natural forces into metaphors for emotion. Nature is presented as beautiful and scary—ravishing, but potentially life-threatening. The replica of *The Raft of the Medusa* becomes an emblem of the notion of "crossing the channel" since Géricault exhibited the vast picture with great success in London after its debut in Paris. British painters not only heard descriptions of this notoriously sensational work, but could see it for themselves. (The possible connections, both deliberate and inadvertent, between British paintings such as Turner's *Disaster at Sea* and Géricault's chilling *tour de force* are lucidly described—along with much else—in the exhibition's excellent, scrupulously researched catalogue.)

In a sense, *The Raft of the Medusa* sums up the entire period under review, with its dramatic contrast of pallid flesh and murky darks, and its suggestion of the interchangeability of death, madness, and survival. The very subject of *The Raft* is a paradigm. Géricault's choice of the culminating moment of a current event that occurred in a distant setting neatly combines Romanticism's taste for the exotic and the modern. Of course, *The Raft of the Medusa*, apart from its subject, could be described as a traditional history painting, a huge *machine* intended to demonstrate the artist's ability to render the large-scale human figure, clothed and nude, in a variety of poses, conditions, and mental states. But far from exalting its theme, as the Academy's high-minded precepts demanded, Géricault's picture is a cynical indictment of the bungling malfeasance of France's post-Napoleonic officialdom, much of which was recruited from the surviving families of the *ancien régime*. (The naval officers in charge of the frigate Medusa crowded 150 soldiers, sailors, and passengers onto an improvised life raft when the ship sank off the coast of Africa; fifteen survived after two weeks adrift.) It's interesting to compare Géricault's ferocious picture (even secondhand, in replica) with the exhibition's other overtly political painting by the other major French painter of the Romantic movement: Delacroix's elegant, seductive allegory *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826, Musée des



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Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux). Intended to commemorate a terrible defeat suffered by the Greeks that year, during their long struggle to throw off Turkish rule, the picture seems relatively conventional compared to Géricault's shiver-inducing image. Greece, presented as a voluptuous young woman with a fetchingly bare, impressive *corsage*, poses in a decorous gesture of submission; an obviously dead hand, trapped beneath the stone on which she kneels, suggests the desperate final act of the city's Greek defenders—they blew up their powder magazines, killing themselves as well as a good many Turks—while a tiny turbaned figure in the background symbolizes the victorious Turkish army. But it's a contemplative picture and eager to please, an elegant evocation of a "politically correct" subject of the day, devoid of the provocative horror and the anger of Géricault's heroically scaled canvas, which come through even in the replica.

Still more horrifying, however, and unequivocal evidence of Géricault's own hand is a group of his preparations for *The Raft of the Medusa*. Drawings show him working his way from relatively straightforward early conceptions towards the stunning final arrangement that brings the viewer almost on to the tossing raft with its gruesome passengers; powerful, closely observed oil studies of severed heads and truncated limbs, and a head of an exhausted-looking black man document the painter's extended, no-holds-barred quest for truthfulness and intensity. These marvelous, revealing works are in some ways more affecting than the huge canvas in the Louvre, partly because of their passionate touch, and partly because they are so obviously done from life, without a transforming narrative to remove them from the brute facts of suffering, mutilation, and death.

The exhibition documents cross-channel connections more cheerfully through such evidence as the twenty-six-year-old Delacroix's head of the English painter Thales Fielding—fresh-faced, energetic, and apparently startled by something beyond the boundaries of the little canvas—which is placed near Fielding's portrait of his friend Delacroix—serious and skeptical, with a mass of dark curls. A large gallery slightly over-filled with paintings exhibited at various times on one side of the channel or the other, conjures up the atmosphere of the Salon and the Royal Acedemy exhibition rooms and—helpfully—documents some of what artists of the day were able to see of each other's work. While the installation of "Crossing the Channel" at the Met is exponentially more economical than the *horror vacui* hanging that was routine in nineteenth-century exhibitions, it nonetheless combines rich, somber wall colors, a tighter hanging than usual, and the occasional double tier of canvases to induce a sense of exhausted overload that may evoke the experience of nineteenth-century shows. (Mercifully, "Crossing the Channel" turns out to be of manageable size.) Many of the works on view at the Met were seen at the Paris Salons of 1824 and 1827, known as the "English Salons" because so many British painters were included. In 1824, four of them—Sir Thomas Lawrence, John Constable, and Delacroix's friends Thales Fielding and the expatriate Richard Parkes Bonington—were awarded medals by Charles X to the amazement of many French observers.

The reaction of Stendhal, writing in the *Journal de Paris*, was typical. (He wrote *La Chartreuse de Parme* and *Le Rouge et le Noir* about fifteen years later, long after he had established a reputation in the relatively new field of art criticism; earlier, when his military career took him to Italy, he had written a book on Italian art.) A passionate advocate of what was then the hot new movement, Romanticism, and an equally passionate enemy of Academic classicism, Stendhal nevertheless disliked the portrait of the duc de Richelieu that the English superstar Lawrence exhibited at the Salon (not the cardinal and not in the Met's exhibition), declaring it "to possess little merit," despite acknowledging its animation. It wasn't simply chauvinistic preference for the



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French School. Stendhal also disliked one of the arch-Romantic Delacroix's paeans to Greek suffering during their War of Independence, which he characterized as "a picture that was intended to depict a plague, and whose author, after having read the newspapers, turned it into a *Massacre at Scio*" (now in the Louvre, but not at the Met). Stendhal does allow that Delacroix has "a feeling for color," but grants Lawrence no redeeming qualities other than setting an example of how one might "depict the appearance of nature by means that are opposed to those of French painters." The British painter must be "very clever" to have placed himself "at the head of the arts in England" on the strength of so little talent, "or else our neighbors in London must be very poor connoisseurs."

"In contrast," Stendhal continues, "the English have sent us magnificent landscapes this year, those of Mr. Constable. I do not think we have anything to equal them. The truthfulness catches the eye and draws one." Like many French viewers, Stendhal was troubled by the informality and rough surfaces of the British painter's efforts; their seemingly unedited response to nature was very different from the more conceptualized French approach of the period. Other critics and Academicians were interested in Constable's technique, but faulted his choice of rural scenes as not being elevated enough. Stendhal, however, despite his reservations, was forced to follow the dictates of his eye. "The casualness of Mr. Constable's broad brush is extreme and the composition of his pictures is not thought through, also he has no ideal; but his delightful landscape with a dog on the left is a mirror of nature." Stendhal concludes by saying that the Constable—*The Hay Wain*—completely eclipses a French landscape hung near it. *The Hay Wain* is not included in the selection at the Met, but this omission is more than compensated for by the presence of another of Constable's submissions to the Salon of 1824, the fresh, vigorous *View on the Stour near Dedham* (1822, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens), with its glittering water, straining boatmen, and palpable sense of moist English air; an ample selection of other fine Constables throughout the exhibition also helps.

As in the Salons and the Royal Academy shows, finding quality work takes a certain amount of effort, since there is a good deal of what is most politely described as extremely competent but not particularly riveting painting. But there are also many high points along the way, such as the lively, airy landscapes of Bonington and Théodore Rousseau, or the small, firmly structured, loosely painted hunting scenes by Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps, designed for private collectors. Since, according to the organizers of the exhibition, the immediacy of English landscape paintings such as Bonington's or Constable's was a powerful stimulant to painters like Rousseau, the French *plein air* tradition of the Barbizon School, which ultimately led to Impressionism, can be traced, at least in part, to the example of the British landscapes exhibited at the "English Salons" or seen by French painters on visits to England. Yet the inclusion at the Met of some sparkling early works by that Salon regular Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, with their assured architecture of generous brushmarks and their faultless orchestration of tones, is evidence that *plein air* painting has other roots. The landscape studies French (and British) artists made in Italy, in their efforts to assimilate the settings where Roman history was enacted, were also influential—once Corot realized that such sturdy, light-filled pictures could be ends in themselves and not simply research.

It's harder to make a case for cross-Channel influence as the reason for including a delectable, brushy Delacroix of a nude odalisque, her voluptuous indolence heightened by rich, Venetian-inspired color, but she is a welcome addition and one that sharply criticizes a group of English and French mythological and literary subjects notable mainly for slippery renditions of impossibly idealized bodies. Delacroix's fleshy reclining



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nude completely eclipses, to use Stendhal's formulation, a weird scene by a once highly admired colleague, depicting Othello and a lifeless Desdemona who seems about to slide, head first, off the bed on which he has strangled her, although here the connection between British source and French painter explains the inclusion of this dubious work. There's no doubt about why a fascinating but distinctly oddball Turner was chosen; *Rouen: View from the Left Bank in the Faubourg St.-Sever* (1827–1828?, Tate, London) is one of a series of oil studies the cantankerous English painter made on visits to France. The brooding, broadly handled little picture plays rows of schematic figures against rows of trees, all softened by hazy light; the result, oddly, seems to anticipate Puvis de Chavannes.

Impressive as the Constables and Turners are and potent as their influence undoubtedly was, "Crossing the Channel" emphasizes neither landscape painting nor improvisations based on French architecture nor celebrations of the sea, its moods and lights. As you move through the show, you discover galleries devoted to gloomy Gothic ruins, tales from mythology, orientalia, animals, and scenes from Shakespeare, Scott, and Byron—especially those involving bloodshed, ravishment, and high drama. While literary subjects seem to have inspired some of the most inadvertently hilarious works in the show, including (in addition to that silly scene from *Othello*) a real rouser from a Walter Scott novel in which an anxious nobleman, his cowering daughter, and a stalwart old beggar react to the prospect of being swept away by a monster wave, the animal category includes some of the goriest works on view, as well as one of the most extraordinary, Géricault's *Horse Frightened by a Storm* (*c.* 1821–1822, National Gallery, London). The idea is remarkable enough: a picture that makes visible the emotions of an animal—admittedly while the artist also takes full advantage of the excuse to paint extreme effects of light. Other French and British painters explored the possibility of the motif, but they illustrated the situation, showing horses plunging in terror, and profiting from the opportunity to show off their ability to depict equine anatomy accurately, no matter how convoluted the pose, rather than their ability to empathize with their subjects. What is astonishing about Géricault's picture is its inwardness. His dappled stallion is preternaturally still, shrinking into himself as though repelled by the edges of the canvas as much as by the fierce weather suggested by inky clouds and the agitated brushwork of the lower part of the canvas; his pale presence, luminous against the dark sky, is the equivalent of the introspective, livid bodies on *The Raft of the Medusa*. That Géricault should have been interested in evoking abstractly the psychological state of a horse, rather than depicting the actions of a terrified beast, becomes even more interesting when you remember that only a few years before painting *Horse Frightened by a Storm*, he executed a series of portraits of disturbed individuals, possibly commissioned by a doctor acquaintance; two of these penetrating, sympathetic images of "monomaniacs"—people believed to have highly specialized aberrations, such as kleptomania or excessive jealousy—are among the most compelling works in the show. Of course, of his first two teachers, one has been described as a monomaniac about antiquity, the other as a monomaniac about horses; there's an early Géricault which seems to demonstrate how many back views of horses can be packed on to a single canvas in stacked rows.

"Crossing the Channel" ends with a good deal of *Sturm und Drang*—a group of works based on thrilling novels, stirring narrative poems, tragic plays, and the like, but a gallery of impeccably chosen watercolors acts as a welcome antidote to all this unbridled emotion—not that similar themes and even more brutal ones, such as tigers attacking horses, aren't represented among the watercolors. But the intimate scale and rapid touch of these nineteenth-century works on paper, with their suggestion of speed, dir-



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ectness, and spontaneity, make the paintings in this section specially appealing to present-day eyes. It was largely the British who pioneered watercolor as a "serious" medium, not only exploiting its portability and flexibility to adopt it in working directly from nature, but also using it for finished, relatively large-scale works. Until well into the nineteenth century, the French considered watercolor to be a minor, rather expedient material, mostly useful for tinting drawings; the large number of sophisticated, accomplished works in this medium submitted by British exhibitors at the Salon of 1824 helped to change this.

Ultimately, of course, the look of spontaneity produced by watercolor's quick-drying properties and notable resistance to overworking became one of the sought-after characteristics of later nineteenth-century French painting, culminating in Impressionism's assiduously cultivated appearance of speed and nonchalance. In the 1820s, though, the exhibition of a British watercolor could trigger a surprising amount of argument. Stendhal got into the fray, defending in the *Journal de Paris* a watercolor with a subject from Shakespeare by Delacroix's friend Thales Fielding: "I don't think much of watercolor; it is a poor genre, but the fable, too, is a small thing compared to an epic poem and La Fontaine is as immortal as Homer." To account for his admiration for Fielding's picture, which showed "Macbeth and Banquo stopped on the heath by the three witches," Stendhal says that he sees "in this watercolor a telling lesson in poetry; this is how supernatural things must be presented to the imagination. . . . A year from now, I will still remember this poor little watercolor of two square feet, and I will have forgotten, as will the public, those immense oil paintings which paper the grand Salon. . . . In the arts, one must touch deeply and leave a memory." Alas, you are unable to judge for yourself, since Fielding's watercolor is nowhere to be found in "Crossing the Channel." But there are plenty of other engaging works, both epic poems and fables, to reward your attention. As visitors to the Salons and the Royal Academy shows once did, you may allow the large, flashy inclusions to declare themselves from a distance. Many of them are very fine, indeed, but there are also many pleasant surprises of a more intimate kind to be had. Perhaps, as visitors to the Salon and the Academy once did, you should return to "Crossing the Channel" more than once, in order to discover something different every time.



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# The dream made real

## *by Jeffrey Meyers*

J.-K. Huysmans, the most brilliant and penetrating art critic of Degas's time, recognized Degas's revolutionary achievement and called his statue of *The Little Dancer* "the only really modern attempt that I know in sculpture. . . . All the ideas about sculpture, about cold, lifeless whiteness, about those memorable formulas copied again and again for centuries, are demolished. . . . M. Degas has knocked over the traditions of sculpture, just as he has for a long time been shaking up the conventions of painting."

Sculpture sustained Degas's hopes and helped keep him alive. As early as 1870, when he was thirty-six, Degas lost the sight of his right eye. For the rest of his long life he suffered from myopia, an irregular field of vision, and an intolerance of bright light, and he was threatened with blindness, which finally extinguished his artistic career. In 1873 he fatalistically exclaimed: "I shall remain in the ranks of the infirm until I pass into the ranks of the blind." Five years later a friend lamented that Degas "spends hours in a dark and desperate mood, matching the gravity of his condition." By 1884 Degas was "often tempted to give it up and to go to sleep forever"—to close his eyes, accept darkness, and wait for death. A decade later, doctors tried to improve his ever-failing sight by covering his right eye and allowing the left one to see through a slit in his spectacles. By 1906 he could see only patches of colors, outlines of forms. At the turn of the century he'd raged against the dying of the light, portrayed himself as a living corpse, and confessed: "I am a dead man, or all but dead, for the thought that he is going blind is death to a painter. . . . I must learn a blind man's trade now."

Degas began to work in wax and clay as early as the mid-1870s. As his sight deteriorated, he gave up painting for the broader strokes of more easily executed pastels and began to concentrate on sculpture. In his pioneering study on this subject, John Rewald wrote that Degas would move his hand along the body of the model or dancer in order to transform the sensation of her figure into a work of art: "even though he was seated very close to the model, he could only dimly distinguish her shape, and had to get up at every instant to feel with his hand the curve of the hip or the position of a muscle which his thumb would model in clay."

Degas had observed horses at breeding farms and racetracks, but (unlike George Stubbs) he did not paint them from life. The account of his unexpected meeting with the journalist François Thiébault-Sisson in 1897 (included in the exhibition catalogue; see below) revealed his creative methods. Degas related an improbable but optimistic anecdote, taken from an unnamed biographer, about how Dickens broke through his imaginative roadblocks by making models to represent his fictional characters:



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> Whenever he lost his way in the complicated weave of his characters and did not know what lot should befall them, he got himself out of the knot . . . by building figures to whom he assigned the names of the characters. When he had them on the table in front of him, he endowed them with the personalities which were . . . suitable to each, he had them talk to each other . . . and the situation instantly cleared up, the newly alert novelist resumed his task and brought it resolutely to a successful conclusion.

The catalogue fails to explain that Degas did not find the germ of this story in a biography of Dickens, but in the chapter on Dickens in Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature* (1863):

> There is a painter in [Dickens], and an English painter. . . . An imagination so lucid and energetic cannot but animate inanimate objects without an effort. . . . Blank nature is peopled, inert matter moves. . . . Imaginary objects are designed with outlines as precise and details as numerous as real objects, and the dream is equal to the reality.

Degas, who identified with the "painter" in Dickens but had forgotten the actual details of Taine's description, distorted Dickens's method until it matched—and justified—his own more literal practice. In his studio he showed his dealer Ambroise Vollard his little wooden horses. "When I come back from the races," he said, "I use them as models. I could not get along without them. You can't turn live horses around to get the proper effects of light."

The delightful exhibition at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco[1] offers three-dimensional views of and separate rooms for each of Degas's recurrent subjects: a stampede of horses, with heads straining forward or twisted to one side; a vibrant corps de ballet that seems ready to jump up and fly away; a bounty of bathers with long swirls of hair (one of them seen from above and lying on her back in a shallow circular tub) purifying themselves with attentive ablutions. One statue portrays a *Woman Taken Unawares* (*c.* 1892) and modestly covering her private parts. But all Degas's women are taken unawares. Bathers wash like cats licking themselves clean or appear, supremely unselfconscious, as if seen through a keyhole.

The *Dancer Fastening the String of Her Tights* (1885–1890), twisting backwards with her right arm on her lower back, has the same *contrapposto* pose as the headless, one-armed torso of the *Bather Rubbing Her Back with a Sponge* (*c.* 1900). Degas's dancers, more solid and substantial than the anorexic skeletons of today, are dressing, adjusting, stretching, bending, bowing, rehearsing, resting, scratching, chatting, and napping. They were often terribly bored and hated to have every pose and gesture controlled by the dancing master. The dancer was trained to conceal her effort; Degas revealed—with a sense of intimacy and immediacy, a vivid equilibrium of forms—the mechanics of strenuous action.

Degas understood that dancers and jockeys have much in common. Both are delicately built, highly trained, intensely competitive athletes, dressed in gorgeously colored costumes. They prepare, with beautiful bodies and graceful movements, for a physically demanding performance before an appreciative but critical audience. With unusual camera angles and cinematic shots of bodies in motion, Degas also reveals the exhaustion and exploitation, the injuries and strain of extreme moments: the dancer's arabesque and the jockey's full gallop, the climactic leaps of the dancers and frantic race of the horses.

Degas's sonnet "Pure-Bred" (one of twenty, and admired by Stéphane Mallarmé), captured in words his love for

1 "Degas Sculptures" opened at the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, on October 18, 2003 and remains on view through January 18, 2004. *Degas Sculptures: Catalogue Raisonné of the Bronzes*, a catalogue of the exhibition edited by Joseph S. Czestochowski, has been published by DAP (288 pages; $55).



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horses and the quintessential qualities he'd portrayed in wax and clay: "the natural disposition and true character of the animal," as he told Thiébault, the accentuation of "bone and muscle and the compact firmness of flesh . . . which is solid and which does not lie." The sonnet describes a spirited and superior thoroughbred, exercising at dawn and taking his energy from the warmth of the rising sun. Carefully trained and well prepared for the race, the innocent colt is taken over by a gambler and exploited for profit rather than for the pure joy of running: "Tout nerveusement nu dans sa robe de soie":

> You can hear him coming, his pace checked by the bit,
> His breath strong and sound. Ever since dawn
> The groom has been putting him through his paces
> And the brave colt, galloping, cuts through the dew.
>
> Blood-strength, like the burgeoning day drawn up from
> The East, gives our novice runner,
> Precocious, impervious to ceaseless work,
> The right to command crossbreeds.
> Nonchalant and diffident, with slow-seeming step,
> He returns home for oats. He is ready.
> Now, all at once, the gambler grabs him.
>
> And for the various games where he's used for gain
> He's forced onto the field for his debut as a thief,
> All nervously naked in his dress of silk.

Degas's bronze horses—rearing on hind legs, galloping with raised forelegs and tail, or lunging ahead with wraith-like jockeys—have fine detail, crisp surfaces and lively movement. Recalling the majestic steed of Verrocchio's *Colleoni* in Venice, these horses spring forward with a sudden release of tension and energy. Compared to Degas's work, which seems to leap off the pedestal, even the sculpture of Rodin and Maillol seems inert.

The most famous piece and only one exhibited in Degas's lifetime—at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881 (the previous year, as an *amuse bouche*, he'd shown its empty glass case)—is *The Little Dancer, Aged Fourteen* (1879–1881). The model was the Belgian adolescent Marie van Goethem, whose mother was a laundress and oldest sister a prostitute and thief. Marie's Aztec features make her look like an Amazonian shrunken head, and she has what Degas called the chic of ugliness. The original three-foot statue had real hair and ribbon, a linen bodice, a diaphanous muslin tutu, and pink satin ballet slippers; the golden amber of the wax captured the warm tints of the human complexion.

The bronze *Little Dancer*—with back-tilted head and splayed feet—has a monkish fringe of hair, closed eyes, sloping forehead, muzzle-like mouth and protruding jaw, long braid tied with a yellow ribbon, unusually thick neck (to support her heavy head), pinned-back shoulders, flat chest, raised hip, slightly distended belly (like a Germanic *Eve*), buttoned off-the-shoulder bodice, tiny waist, ragged gauzy skirt, spindly legs, thin arms and hands clasped behind her back. *Jolie-laide*, pathetic, frail, vulnerable yet magically attractive, she resembles the dressed-up doll-like icons that populate the dusky corners of Spanish cathedrals.

In 1881, *The Little Dancer*, as Ann Dumas notes, "seemed to invoke all at once the macabre associations of an Egyptian mummy, a religious relic, and a kitsch verismo waxwork"—an African fetish or voodoo image. One critic was shocked by "the fierce inelegance of the pupil who will grow up into a woman for whom diplomats will commit follies." Indeed, Marie was already acquiring a reputation as a dancer with the lightest of morals.

Degas's technique was recklessly and deliberately self-destructive. As filling for his wax and clay statues, he used matches, paper, cork, sticks, rags, rope, wood,



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sponges, cloth plugs, and even the broken handles of paint brushes. These objects worked their way to the surface and made holes in the sculpture. "I must be a fool to have put corks in this figure," Degas exclaimed in a moment of exasperation. "Imbecile that I am, with my mania for wanting to make economies of two coppers! There is my [work] entirely destroyed! Oh, why did I thrust myself into sculpture at my age?"

Vollard was horrified when an early version of *The Little Dancer* suddenly crumbled to pieces, and urged Degas to make his work permanent. But he rejected this idea:

> "Have it cast!" he cried. "Bronze is all right for those who work for eternity. My pleasure consists in beginning over and over again. Like this . . . . Look!" He took an almost finished *Danseuse* from his modelling stand and rolled her into a ball of clay. . . . "All you think of, Vollard, is what it was worth. But I wouldn't take a bucket of gold for the pleasure I had in destroying it and beginning over again."

In his endless quest for perfection and lack of interest in the finished work—the very heart of his aesthetics—Degas resembled Leonardo da Vinci. As Giorgio Vasari wrote in his life of Leonardo: "His knowledge of art, indeed, prevented him from finishing many things which he had begun, for he felt that his hand would be unable to realize the perfect creations of his imagination, as his mind formed such difficult, subtle and marvellous conceptions that his hands, skilful as they were, could never have expressed them."

After Degas's death in 1917, about one-hundred-fifty wax sculptures (known only to his most intimate friends) were found in his studio. They had to be hidden in the cellar of his bronze-founder, Adrien Hébrard, to protect them from the German bombardment of Paris. Some had almost crumbled to dust, others had his thumbprints still visible. Only seventy-four of them were intact or could be repaired. These were cast in rough-surfaced bronze, limited to twenty-two copies of each work and first exhibited in 1921. The casting, Thiébault observed, gave freshness and keenness to "the fissured wax shapes, weakened and dusty, with the armature breaking through the surface" and twisting out of the extended limbs. The only complete collections of Degas's sculpture are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, and the Museu de Arte in São Paulo, from which this exhibition comes.

Degas was influenced by both Greek and Renaissance sculpture. *The Young Daughter of Niobe, with Hands Behind Her Back* (440 BC, Terme Museum, Rome), for example, influenced his *Dancer at Rest, Hands Behind Her Back* (1880). And he sometimes captured the delicacy, grace and power of Donatello and Cellini. Degas himself clearly influenced the sculpture of Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso. But his truest artistic legacy is found in the magnificent drawings of horses and riders and the statues of dancers by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a young artist killed (while Degas was still alive) in the Great War.



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# New realities for the art museum

## *by Kenneth Wayne*

The past few years have seen significant changes in the museum field, with some developments that will mark the field for decades to come. One interesting, and very effective, development has been the noticeable increase in double-barreled exhibitions: "Matisse Picasso" (MOMA, Tate, Pompidou, 2002–2003; curated by John Elderfield, Kirk Varnedoe, John Golding, Elizabeth Cowling, Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, and Anne Baldassari); "Van Gogh-Gauguin: the Studio of the South" (Art Institute of Chicago, 2001–2002; curated by Douglas Druick); "Manet-Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/ Musée d'Orsay, 2003; curated by Gary Tinterow and Geneviève Lacambre); and "Schoenberg, Kandinsky and the Blue Rider" (Jewish Museum, New York, 2003; curated by Esther da Costa Meyer and Fred Wasserman).

Traditionally, museum exhibitions have been monographic, based on a single artist or a single movement. One reason for the popularity of the monographic approach is that it is the simplest, most straightforward, and most direct way of presenting material to a public which is often unfamiliar with the images being seen. On occasion, exhibitions will focus on a single artist within a certain time or place, perhaps joined by fellow artists (e.g., the Art Institute's current "Manet and the Sea," the Boston MFA's "Gauguin in Tahiti," 2004, or my own "Modigliani and the Artists of Montparnasse" of this past year).

While the two-pronged approach sounded a bit academic at first—like sitting in an art history lecture and looking at slide comparisons—it has proven to be remarkably successful. The visual images carry the thesis better than words ever could. (A cynic would say that it is an attempt to get two flashy names into the title and therefore double one's chances of attracting visitors to the show.) The Matisse-Picasso show, for example, was so brilliant, and conveyed so well the point of the show—that Matisse and Picasso had an undeniably powerful lifelong artistic dialogue—that one almost wonders why we have all spent so much time thinking and talking about Picasso-Braque. The idea for the exhibition came from Picasso himself: "You have got to be able to picture side by side everything Matisse and I were doing at that time. No one has ever looked at Matisse's painting more carefully than I; and no has looked at mine more carefully than he." Picasso's artistic relationship with Matisse extended all the way until Matisse's death in 1954, as compared to his brief connection with Braque, a period from 1907 to 1914. As we know, Picasso's large seminal *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; Museum of Modern Art) was a response to Matisse's *Bonheur de Vivre* (1905–1906; Barnes Foundation), which had been exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants of 1906.

Matisse and Picasso shared more than just



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the same subject matter—portraits, still lifes, landscapes, reclining figures, interiors with tables, studio scenes—but even the same stylistic approach at times, with Picasso's work occasionally looking more decorative and Matisse's work showing marked cubist tendencies. Moreover, they were the only artists of their generation to challenge themselves in all of the major media—painting, sculpture, drawing, and printmaking—and display a remarkably high level of accomplishment across the board. Competition with each other was undoubtedly a motivating factor here. (Modigliani is the only other artist in that generation to come close; he worked in all these media except for printmaking.) Like all good shows, "Matisse Picasso" was an exhibition waiting to happen, waiting to be discovered, not a forced idea dreamt up late at night.

Indeed, it has always been my feeling that Picasso's entire career was a reaction to that of Matisse. Matisse, the older artist, established his career first, making a name for himself as the great colorist and liberator of color. Not wanting to be seen as a Matisse follower, as were so many other artists who flocked to the Parisian capital, Picasso had to stake a new territory and decided to make form and dimension the characteristics that he would dominate and change. Picasso had started out as an impressive colorist, as seen in his Rose and Blue periods, but once Matisse made a splash with his exhibition of *Bonheur de Vivre*, Matisse secured color as his own domain. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, with his success and reputation secure, Picasso could allow himself to return to color with force and showed that he too could be a brilliant colorist as seen in his famous "weeping women series" of portraits.

With "Van Gogh–Gauguin," the point was not to show how similar their work was stylistically. Rather, the show demonstrated how their intense friendship and rivalry helped them each to define their own individual approach and to make a substantial contribution to art history. Each was responsible for opening up a different avenue in modern art. For Van Gogh, it was important to base one's work on nature and the world observed. For Gauguin, it was acceptable to improvise and dream. Their discussions helped each realize their respective paths.

In "Manet–Velázquez," visitors experienced the impact that seventeenth-century Spanish art (by Velázquez, Ribera, Murillo, El Greco, Zurbarán, and others) had on nineteenth-century French painters (Delacroix, Millet, Degas, Courbet, Manet) and the beginning of modernism. The influence of Velázquez on Manet, and his "Spanish pictures," was the main story, though. Now one cannot think of Manet, the father of modern art, without thinking of the profound debt he owed to Velázquez.

"Kandinsky Schoenberg" is also cross-cultural, but in an interdisciplinary, rather than a geographic, sense: between art and music. It chronicles in fascinating depth the intense relationship of the artist and the composer, as one tried to apply the abstract qualities of music in paint (e.g. *Fragment 2 for Composition VII, 1913* [Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo]) and the other attempted to create color music in his "Farben" from Opus 16. This intoxicating relationship came at a critical point in the development of modern art and the two media were changed forever as a result.

Given the effectiveness of the double-barreled or two-pronged approach, it is probable that it will be around for some years to come, until the many rich possibilities offered by it are mined fully. The potential subjects are numerous: Robert and Sonia Delaunay; Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner; Man Ray and Duchamp; Léger and Stuart Davis, etc.

American art has also been on the rise both in auction rooms and in museums, having particular resonance during this era of heightened patriotism. Many of the great post-war names have been or are getting major retrospectives: James Rosenquist (Menil Collection, Houston, and Guggen-



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heim Museum, 2003; curated by Walter Hopps and Sarah Bancroft); Robert Rauschenberg (Guggenheim Museum, 1997; curated by Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson); Ellsworth Kelly (Guggenheim Museum, 1997, curated by Diane Waldman); Jackson Pollock (MOMA, 1998; curated by the late Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel); Philip Guston (Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art, 2003; curated by Michael Auping); Barnett Newman (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2002; curated by Ann Temkin); Ernst Kirchner (National Gallery of Art, 2003; curated by Andrew Robinson); and Adolph Gottlieb (organized by IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez, Valencia, Spain, travelled to the Jewish Museum, New York 2002–2003). Are Frankenthaler and Lichtenstein retrospectives forthcoming?

An earlier American modernist, Marsden Hartley, received his first major retrospective in the United States in twenty years (Wadsworth Atheneum and subsequent venues, 2003, curated by Elizabeth Kornhauser), as did Elie Nadelman (Whitney Museum, 2003, curated by Barbara Haskell). Man Ray's American period received fascinating and serious attention (Montclair Art Museum, 2003, curated by Gail Stavitsky and Francis Naumann). Helped by the comfortable passage of time to allow objective reflection, as well as the palpable sense of patriotism now in the United States, this celebration of American art is a trend that is likely to continue and intensify in the near future.

More is also being done with Austrian and German modernism, helped by the arrival of the stunningly beautiful Neue Galerie on Fifth Avenue in New York and its regular exhibition offerings (recent exhibitions have featured Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka, Wiener Werkstatte design, etc.). The so-called "Vienna Project in the Berkshires" added to the recent offerings. This was a collaborative effort by cultural organizations in and around Williamstown to feature Austrian art, music, and theater; it included Klimt landscapes at the Clark Art Institute (2002; guest curated by Stephan Koja), "Josef Hoffman: Homes of the Wittgensteins," and a gilded model by Otto Wagner of the Academy of Fine Arts. The Williams College Museum of Art held a provocative exhibition on Hitler's art and artistic background (curated by Deborah Menaker Rothschild). At the same time, Mass MOCA featured "Uncommon Denominator: New Art from Vienna."

There has been no less activity with German art: "Max Beckmann and Paris: Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Léger and Rouault" (St. Louis Art Museum, 1999; curated by Cornelia Homburg); Max Beckmann (MOMA, 2003; curated by Robert Storr); "Ernst Kirchner at the National Gallery" (2003; curated by Andrew Robison); "German Art Now" (St. Louis Art Museum, 2003; curated by Cornelia Homburg); and August Sander (SFMOMA, 2003; organized by the August Sander archive). Over the years, German modernism has not received as much attention in the United States as its French counterpart. This increased interest in German and Austrian art, and a weaning away from French art's dominance in the modern area, is not necessarily an anti-French statement as much as an attempt to give a sophisticated public more to see.

These are also banner years for photography, both modern and contemporary, in the market place and in the museum, as the medium has risen to great prominence in the past fifteen years: Charles Sheeler photographs (MFA Boston, 2002–2003; curated by Theodore Stebbins, Gilles Mora, and Karen Haas); Alfred Stieglitz (National Gallery of Art, 2002; curated by Sarah Greenough); Ansel Adams (organized by SFMOMA and John Szarkowski, 2002–2003); Dorothea Lange (Getty Museum, 2003); Margaret Bourke-White (Phillips Collection, 2003) and several recent Edward Weston shows, just to name a handful of examples of the many recently organized. Photography auctions have only been around for about twenty-five years and courses in the history of photography in colleges and universities for about fifteen.



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The two most significant recent subjects to affect exhibitions of modern art are stolen works from the Holocaust era and, in this age of terrorism, the cost of art insurance. Both issues will become even more major in the future and directly affect the type of exhibitions that are organized. Until five years ago, one would see an article or two per year about art stolen by the Nazis during the Holocaust. This subject has increased with every passing year to the point where one sees an article per month, or sometimes even more often. Ten years ago, or even five years ago, a curator of modern art did not necessarily need to do research on the provenance of works in his or her exhibition. Now it is a must, and curators need to factor the appropriate amount of time and cost into their exhibition preparations.

American and even French museums have been good about addressing this issue head on. American museums such as the Cleveland Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art have posted provenance information on their websites to facilitate research. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has a full-time staff member working on provenance issues. The French have set up an office to address those works in French public collections that may have been stolen by Nazis before they made their way into the marketplace. In November 2003, a major Léger that had hung for decades in the Centre National Georges Pompidou was returned to the family of Paul and Léonce Rosenberg and was sold at Christie's New York. The English also have a specific office to address such issues.

More and more resources are being devoted to this topic. The American Association of Museums has published a handbook called *The AAM Guide to Provenance Research* and put a link on their website with new archival information for the researcher. The Getty's Provenance Index, which seemed like a quaint and quiet entity fifteen years ago for doing research on Old Master paintings, has now assumed vital importance. The materials available seem to be increasing, and with them more positions and researchers dedicated to this topic. It is quickly becoming a major growth area for employment in the art field and will become ever more so in the future. Individuals with an expertise in this area will be highly desired.

Why now? The main reason, I think, is that enough time has passed since World War II that the children and grandchildren of the victims are now taking up the cause. For the victims themselves, it was too painful a subject to address. Their main need and objective was to recuperate mentally from their horrible experience, not necessarily to find long-lost pieces of property. Provenance research and the return of art stolen by the Nazis will, in my opinion, be a major issue for decades for everyone working with modern art: curators, academics, dealers, collectors, and auction houses.

Finally, the attacks of September 11 will have a lasting effect on museum exhibitions, in one measure, because of rising insurance premiums. Art insurance typically covers most provisions except for terrorism. When included, the cost is exorbitant. This has made Federal Indemnification a highly sought-after way of insuring expensive shows, for it does cover terrorism. With Federal Indemnification, the United States government becomes the insurer. It is a brilliant way for the government to help museums. But because of all the safeguards required (e.g., the need of couriers), claims are virtually nonexistent. It is the best coverage one can get, as it covers all eventualities. This inspired program was the brainchild of J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, in the 1970s, who wanted to be able to mount major blockbuster exhibitions, something which was prevented because of insurance costs. The Federal Indemnification program is finite, however, meaning that they have a set amount of coverage to offer each year, even as more museums are now seeking that coverage. The number of large-scale expensive exhibitions may abate somewhat with an emphasis shifting to smaller, focused shows. There are many new realities facing us in the museum field today.



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# New poems
## *by Eric Ormsby*

### White phalaenopsis

The protocol of orchids lies in subterfuge
swanning petals form a curve's cortege
where slant diplomacies of lip engage

the winter-dociled bee. Such grace is made
of tasseled rhetoric, arced only to dissuade:
See how the orchid angles out of the white shade

that shrouds its calyx. Form can never lie
we tell ourselves, although the pilgrim fly
find heaven in fragrance where it comes to die.

Is the orchid's flowering but stratagem,
mere disillusion of a diadem,
or our most shadowy Elysium?



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# Daybreak at the straits

*For Richard Outram*

1

The clouds that lie in cinnabar striations
are juggled by a nimble waterspout
too distant for significance. The dim
pink of daybreak binds the sky with dark
barely distinguishable from a darker sea.
The horizon mortices itself with chinks of rose.
What we call day is nothing more
than disintegrated darkness at the Straits.
Night bickers for asylum still
in unlaced shoes, implores the paling windowpanes
to be steadfast for dark against the light.
I am witness to the spectral provocations
daylight introduces to a vista
that all night stood
islanded by nothing but the stars.

2

Tired of the meditations on futility
that now retard my nights I walked to see
the waters of the Straits in darkness hesitate,
recoil and hover, tremble just before they calibrate
shocked sandstone, the staved cliff, the pitiable
barricades we raise against the terrible
erosions waves exact. The wind's a whittler here,
pares quartz to thinnest splinters, loves the sheer
spare sea-lathed skeletons of objects cast ashore.

It comforts me at night, a watchman of the stars
that only change by reasonable laws, to parse
the luminous degradations of the dark
as lethal light insinuates and tinges. Dogs bark
down at Rice Point, a rooster clears its throat outside.
From the cliff a cormorant topples like a suicide.



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3

In the watches of the night, as the Psalmist said,
I meditate on darkness, I remember my dead.
The dark is palpable, has a silken-sash-drawn feel,
gloves the troubled fingertips with a cochineal
comfort, the way spring water laves the skin
with its brisk plush touch. I will gather in
my hours as the darkness climbs and spreads.
It has become the ocean. Up to our heads
we bob and drift, remembranceless,
and for all we cling to spars of nothingness,
names burn their starlight on dark irises.

I feel the soul inside me, dear dieresis
that thews my breath and flesh, that separates
heart's thrusting muscle as it meditates
from all the rough heart cherishes, I sense
the supple disjunctions of the animal
threshed in the indiscernible
meshes of the element and, terrified,
crow with the cock and bark with the farmer's dog,
wriggle awake, crawl from the salt bog
of sleep unsatisfied:

on my lips and on my eyelids as the new
sun shoulders the clouds aside,
a darkness sits, intangible as dew.



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London journal

# The art of getting in touch

*by John Gross*

There has been a marked change in the British political climate. The Conservative party was heading for disaster—quite possibly irreversible disaster—under a weak leader, Iain Duncan Smith. Now it has replaced him with a strong leader, or a man with all the makings of one, Michael Howard. And the change proved unexpectedly painless. Howard was elected leader unopposed. For the time being, at least, the party has rallied solidly behind him.

Meanwhile Labour's troubles are increasing. Dissent over the Iraq war has taken its toll. Long-promised improvements in public services such as health and transport remain a mirage. The widely recognized but previously unacknowledged power struggle between Tony Blair and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, has come right out into the open.

For most commentators the possibility of the Conservatives winning the next election still remains unthinkable. They may well be wrong: events in politics have a way of moving faster than pundits predict. But no one, least of all Howard himself, would deny that he faces a long slog.

What must he do to succeed? Advice has come pouring in, and the main message is clear. He must throw in his lot with "the modernizers." The party is living in the past: he must put it back in touch with the real Britain, the country as it is today.

Most of this talk is pretty vague. It certainly doesn't have much to do with foreign policy or economic policy or even with public services. A few commentators have tried to present closer integration with Europe as the key modernizing issue. Others have implied that modernization is above all a question of sexual politics—of legalizing same-sex marriage, for instance. But for the most part modernity is assumed to be a matter of social outlook and (regrettable but inescapable word) lifestyle. It's the culture, stupid.

Conservatives of a philosophical bent are unlikely to have much sympathy with such generalized calls for change. They well be tempted to react by growling and reaching for their Burke. But they would be wrong to do so—wrong if they are also interested in practical politics, in who loses and who wins.

The modernizers no doubt exaggerate. To some extent they have simply internalized anti-Conservative propaganda. But the problem they harp on is a real one. The perception that the Conservatives are out of touch is reflected in their pitifully small representation in the major British cities. It is a perception which stands in the way of a full-scale revival.

What should be done about it is another matter. Embracing pop culture and courting its icons aren't necessarily answers in themselves. When William Hague was leader of the Conservatives, he paid a well-publicized visit to the Notting Hill Carnival ("Eur-



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ope's largest street celebration," as we are constantly being told) wearing a baseball cap: it was a mistake which he never lived down. New Labour's more blatant attempts to woo the pop world often misfired, too. The era of "Cool Britannia" now seems very remote.

The prospects of Michael Howard showing up anywhere in a basecall cap are gratifyingly slim. A tough lawyer, who first made his name as a minister under Margaret Thatcher, he doesn't have the temperament for such tricks. Part of his appeal is that he looks and sounds like a grown-up.

But he also announced, on being confirmed as leader, that he had "mellowed." This was partly a way of making clear that he intends to lead the party from the center (if he is going to hold it together, he has no real choice); but it was also, I think, a signal that he has taken on board the more reasonable of the modernizers' criticisms. Nothing else he accomplishes for the Conservatives will mean much if he doesn't make them electorally acceptable.

Moderate modernization can only be a piecemeal affair. It calls for an adjustment here, a change of personnel there; for more inventiveness than the party has shown in recent years, and more openness than it needed to show when its position in British life was secure. To take only one example, but an important one: both women and ethnic minorities are less well represented among Conservative MPs than among Labour MPs. This is not only wrong in itself, it is bad politics.

Meanwhile the world out there, the world with which Conservatives are supposed to get back in touch, goes its own way. That way is determined, to a degree which would have seemed improbable even a few years ago, by the media and its adjuncts (sport, fashion etc); and the media's heroes excite an interest which seems to grow more ravenous every day.

Nobody needs to be told that we live in a celebrity culture, but the extent to which celebrity worship has come to infiltrate other departments of life can still surprise. *The Independent* newspaper decided to mark the sixth anniversary of Tony Blair becoming prime minister by canvassing public opinion about him: "Voters Deliver Their Verdicts." Of the representative cross-section of twenty voters whom they interviewed and photographed, sixteen were celebrities or mini-celebrities—two television presenters, a disc jockey, a pop musician, a screenwriter and so forth.

Or to take a more or less random non-political example, *The Guardian* has a section called "Parents" which recently ran an article on the problems that can arise when children opt for the same career as their parents. All seven of the cases which were discussed involved well-known actors or writers. No butchers or bakers, no dentists or accountants.

The obvious assumption behind both pieces is that ordinary readers can't be expected to take much interest in people like themselves. For a subject to hold their attention, it has to have stardust sprinkled over it.

The need to add a celebrity touch is particularly acute when it comes to newspapers choosing pictures. A Somerset valley which features in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* is in danger of being blighted by the installation of two giant wind turbines. The article about it in *The Sunday Telegraph* was accompanied by a picture—no, not of Thomas Hardy but of Madonna, who has a house nearby.

As for the adulation heaped on pop stars and the like, at this hour of the day it is hardly worth commenting on. Perhaps even the extraordinary fawning tributes paid to Mick Jagger on his sixtieth birthday (including one from a leading art historian) shouldn't raise any eyebrows. But a recent incident further down the scale of fame does seem to me interesting for what it reveals about Britain—or a large slice of it—today.

Last month a twenty-year-old member of a pop group called Girls Aloud stood trial for punching a part-time lavatory attendant in a club, a thirty-seven-year-old black



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woman who had tried to stop her stealing some sweets. (The victim was left with a nasty facial injury.) There were two charges, simple assault and racially aggravated assault, depending on whether the girl had called the woman "a f***ing bitch," according to one version, or "a f***ing black bitch," according to another. In the end she was found guilty of simple assault. The judge commented that she showed "no remorse whatever."

A conviction for racism would have sunk her for good, but as it is her career has been unaffected. A few nights after the trial she was strutting her stuff on the BBC television program "Top of the Pops," while her website carries a heart-warming message for her fans: "thank U so much 4 everything. I really appreciate it: loadsa love hugs and kisses."

In the words of Jenny McCartney, the excellent writer to whom I owe the information about the website, it is rather as though the girl "had just been through some terrible kidnapping ordeal that was no fault of her own." And McCartney also makes the point that the incident may well prove a valuable career-move, since "it can be used to garnish the perpetrator's lucrative 'bad-girl' image."

Pop makes its own rules, and the pop mentality subverts better things. Every so often the BBC comes up with a stunt designed to prove that it still cares as much as it once did about literature and the arts. Its latest effort in this direction is something called The Big Read, in which viewers have been asked to vote for their favorite books. The claims of the top twenty-one are currently being canvassed on a series of short programs, with the result of the vote for the very best title of all due to be announced in December.

The shortlist itself, apart from a handful of classics, is fairly depressing (*Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, Harry Potter, and *The Lord of the Rings*; America represented by J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller, and Harper Lee). The choice of presenters is much worse (television entertainers, mostly; a particularly crude stand-up comedian arguing the claims of *1984*). But what was truly dismal was the initial program in which the entire shortlist was discussed. In the course of it we were told that *Wuthering Heights* was "deeply, deeply silly—no one over the age of 13 should read it." A contemporary novelist who had made the list was dismissed as someone who wrote "like he'd never ever shagged in his life, just read about it in books."

At around the time that these opinions were being aired, the main examination board for "A-levels" (the key qualification for getting into an English university) was complaining that too many of this summer's literature papers were marred by soap-opera language. And in the examples it quoted, the echoes of programs such as "Eastenders" were indeed loud and clear. Hamlet was "big-headed" and "all mouth and no action" and "needed to move on"; Banquo was "laid back"; Antony "could have had it all if it wasn't for Cleo." One bright student described "Cleo" as "high-maintenance."

The examiners are fighting a losing battle, however. A senior academic—and government adviser—has just attracted headlines by urging universities to offer courses in such things as "the branding of David Beckham" (the England football captain). Another has chimed in, advocating the systematic study of "Eastenders," "Sex and the City," and other "hot-button" items. In an effort to drum up enthusiasm for classics, Oxford University has invited Brad Pitt (soon to be seen in a film about the Trojan war) to come and speak to students, or at any rate hang around.

Some professors have undoubtedly mastered the art of getting in touch. Perhaps Michael Howard, in his quest for votes, can learn something from them. But let us hope not too much.



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Letter from Paris

# The Comédie-Française, Gauguin & Botticelli

*by Daniel Mark Epstein*

Is there anti-American sentiment in France? And did I experience it?

The simple answers are "yes" and "no," but the questions must be viewed within a broad historical context. The affection between the French and Americans has a long and turbulent history going back to the American Revolution, the French admiring our energy and enterprise, and Americans traveling to France for its art, theater, cuisine, and fashion. The French fascination with American pop culture arose during the jazz era and has steadily increased. The recent tension over our administration's policy in Iraq has been described as a "lover's quarrel," not to diminish the seriousness of the cause but to put the rift in perspective. It cannot last because there is otherwise too much underlying sympathy and interdependence, and the disagreement of governments does not translate perfectly into antipathy between peoples. Feelings were far worse during the early 1970s, when I recall being taken to task by total strangers because American fighter jets were bombing Hanoi.

In those days the working-class French, by and large, did not speak our language. It was while Jacques Chirac was Mayor of Paris in the 1970s that the city at last admitted that tourism was so important that it would behoove one and all to learn English. Now the American who hopes to practice his French must insist upon it, as every cabdriver and schoolchild is eager to speak English. I insisted and found people to be obliging.

So it was that I discovered that Parisians in cafés and on the street were no less friendly to an American because his government's foreign policy is widely condemned in Europe. And I heard this joke that conveys the mood of the French *à propos* the efforts of President Bush.

The Pope and the President are in a rowboat in high seas. A strong wind is whipping up the foam and blows the pontiff's skullcap off his head; waves carry the cap far from the boat. President Bush steps over the gunwale, walks across the water, picks up the Pope's cap, and calmly walks back to the boat. He puts the skullcap back on the Pope's head, pats it, and returns to his seat.

The next morning the headlines in the French newspapers read: PRESIDENT BUSH CANNOT SWIM.

It has been a while since theatergoers came from abroad to see new plays in Paris, or even lively productions of the classics. One devoted fan told me she had grown weary of riding the train to the provinces to see plays because the scene in the capital was so dull. But for two years I have been hearing that there was new life in the state theater, the Comédie-Française, under the general direction of Marcel Bozonnet, who took over as Administrateur Général from Jean-Pierre Miquel in 2001. There was some progress during M. Miquel's eight years, during which the Comédie-Française took over the Théâtre du Vieux-Columbier on the Left



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Bank, and opened the Studio-Théâtre in the Carrousel du Louvre, for experimental works.

Miquel's tenure will be gratefully remembered as a bricks-and-mortar regime rather than for its artistry. History has weighed heavily on the company. The well-trained actors—lacking the imaginative direction that would free them to find their own character as an ensemble—had grown stodgy, haunted by shades of Annie Ducaux, Louis Seigner, Jean Meyer, and other sociétaires of the beloved troupe of the post-war period. Now this appears to be changing.

The French drama fan was excited that she no longer has to ride the train to see a play like the American Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* playing at the Théâtre du Vieux-Columbier. With no time to spare, I wanted to get to the heart of the repertory, at the Salle Richilieu, the flagship theater near the Palais Royale, where they are staging *reprise* productions of *Le Malade Imaginaire* (1673) and *Le Dindon* (1896).

Molière's imperishable story of the hypochondriac so obsessed with his bodily functions that he insists on betrothing his daughter to a dim-witted, reactionary physician (so as to have one in the family) and giving her legacy to his scheming second wife is the sixth-most-often performed play in the theater's history. Now one can see why, under the classic direction of the Swiss *metteur en scène* Claude Stratz. With the revered Alain Pralon in the lead role of Argan (originally played by Molière) and the saucy Muriel Mayette playing his faithful servant Toinette, the comedy sings.

The curtain opens upon Argan on a rough throne (which is also a potty seat) dressed in a robe which hangs open to reveal long underwear and a diaper. He also wears a white headpiece twisted at the top corners into little rabbit ears, a cross between a jester's cap and a baby's bonnet; Pralon has chosen to render Argan as a spoiled, tyrannical baby. Seated alone, he delivers the opening monologue, rendering his accounts to his doctors for treatments hilariously detailed. Enraged, he begins to ring for Toinette. When she does not come, Argan, wielding the handbell like a baby's rattle, stages a full-blown tantrum.

Pouting comically, Pralon makes smooth transitions from infantile foolishness to stubborn caviling in arguing for his daughter's betrothal and an illegal will and testament. In this he is aided by the deliciously wicked Isabelle Gardien in the role of his wife Béline, and then by his brother Béralde, the voice of reason against quackery, played with contrasting vigor and wit by Alain Lenglet. Of the doctors, the young Thomas Diafoirus who comes to woo Argan's daughter Angélique, is the most amusing. Nicolas Lormeau plays the dimwit as a gangly automaton with facial tics, who has memorized his unctuous speeches, but before each utterance he must elaborately square his feet and shoulders, stretch his arms at his sides, and steady his twitching countenance.

The weak link in the ensemble is the ingenue, Angélique. The script was written on the cutting edge of a revolution not only in medical science (Diafoirus condemns Harvey's theory of the circulation of the blood), but in women's rights. As played by the lovely Julie Secard, Angélique is too vulnerable, too quick to melt in tears as she is defending her right to approve her husband. Her lover Cléante, who poses as a music master to gain access to the household, is charmingly portrayed by the effervescent Laurent Stocker. More about him presently, as he is the only comedian with lead roles in both plays under review.

The story of the premiere of this piece is so dramatic that it has become part of the collective memory. The best productions build upon the ancient calamity as upon the ruins of a monument. The famous scene wherein Toinette poses as a doctor to convince Argan that all doctors are fools, Mayette carries off to perfection. She opens a dusty valise and pulls out cooking utensils—a meat grinder, a butcher's knife, and a long tube like the crepe snakes that spring from a jack-in-the-box. She goes to work on the wide-eyed Argan,



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interrogating him about his symptoms, and at the end of each of his lines solemnly pronounces the word "poumon" (lung). She says it is his lungs that ail him, not his kidneys as the others have insisted. It was at this point in the 1673 premiere, on the fourth night, that Molière in the role of Argan coughed real blood. The playwright died a few hours later, of a burst blood vessel in his lung.

It is a play about deception: Béline pretending to love Argan; the physicians claiming to know what they cannot; Cléante pretending to be a music master; and the wily Toinette dressing up as a doctor. Meanwhile Molière, dying, was pretending to be a healthy man who believed he was ill. Finally, it is by feigning death that Argan learns the true feelings of his wife and daughter. Perhaps this gray area between truth and fiction inspires the dim lighting by Jean-Philippe Roy. If so, it is a point made at some expense. In any case one cannot watch the final scenes of Molière's masterpiece—Toinette's imposture, and then Argan's playing dead to hear first his wife's cries of delight, then his daughter's sobs—without recalling the real-life tragedy underlying it all. Pralon plays the scenes of recognition with sensitivity, tempering sorrow with gentle humor.

Georges Feydeau (1862–1921), master of the French farce, is a hard sell these days. A Frenchman told me that his generation had been Feydeau'd to death as children by TV adaptations of his ribald comedies. So it is not easy to revive even a play as clever as *Le Dindon* (*The Turkey*, 1896) which has not been staged here since 1971.

The humor in Feydeau is almost entirely the humor of adulterous situations and sight gags, scheming and embarrassment, rather than of words. Molière's three-hundred-year-old jokes laugh Feydeau's off the stage. When Lucienne, a married woman, discovers that Pontagnac, the man who has followed her home, is not only a friend of her husband Vatelin, but married himself, she is shocked. "Married?" she exclaims. "*You*, are married?" To which the lecher sheepishly replies, "Well, yes, a little . . . " That is about as good as it gets, in Feydeau.

His technique is to take several, in this case four, couples, and stir them into a dangerous stew of flirtation and adultery. The married, high-minded Lucienne Vatelin, played with elegance and simmering sensuality by Florence Viala, is secretly welcoming the advances of the bachelor Redillon, who would risk his life to sleep with her, as would Pontagnac. Madame Vatelin defends monogamy, swearing she would only have sex with another man if her husband proved unfaithful.

The doorbell rings. It is Maggy, an aggressive Briton with whom Vatelin recently had a fling abroad. Privately he tries to explain to her that they cannot carry on in Paris as they had in London; she blackmails him by threatening suicide, so he agrees to meet her in a hotel recommended by—his old friend Pontagnac. Now Pontagnac has Lucienne right where he wants her. When he has shown her husband in bed with Maggy, Pontagnac understands that Lucienne will take her revenge by sleeping with him.

I have not described half the plot or the eighteen characters who run in and out of bedrooms, under and over beds in L'Hôtel Ultimas, screaming. Feydeau is known for his irreverence, his cruelty. He should be as well known for the pathos underlying his critique of marriage—so subtly captured by this ensemble. By accident the room Vatelin has booked for his tryst gets taken by a retired army doctor (Igor Tyezka) and his deaf wife (Catherine Salviat) who is passionate about the opera "because of the dancers." When people shout at her she cannot hear; but she understands every word her husband mouths to her inches from her face. The old major in parade dress, brandishing a riding crop, and his young wife pirouetting here and there, are clearly daft, but deeply in love. Such is the skill of Lukas Hemleb's direction. Nothing in the script suggests such feeling.

The mark of such impeccable ensemble work is that individual performances are not conspicuous. Yet I do want to single out



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Florence Viala, whose stately Lucienne is the conscience at the center of Feydeau's cyclone of shenanigans. As she follows the sleazy Pontagnac in pursuit of her straying husband it is with a heavy heart. When Pontagnac (seemingly) exposes the husband *in flagrante* (by hiding two electronic bells under the mattress), she is nearly inconsolable, and leaves the stunned Pontagnac to take her revenge with her admirer Redillon at his home, in Act III.

Young Laurent Stocker, the gifted, acrobatic comedian who is Cléante in *Le Malade Imaginaire*, plays Redillon. Stocker is shorter than Viala. His antics in wooing the faithful wife exaggerate the gestures of courting without ever dislodging the actor from his center of gravity. He shrieks in frustration, pulling his blond hair, then quickly recovers his dignity.

When at last Lucienne arrives to give herself to him, Viala lends new meaning to the phrase "letting down your hair." The dark hair has been chastely pinned up. Now as she removes the pins, shakes out the mane of hair, stretches seductively, and hikes up her skirt, Redillon is petrified; Viala becomes the sexiest woman I have ever seen on a stage, without removing a stitch of clothing. On the floor, downstage center, is a lion skin, complete with head and teeth. Stalking Redillon, Viala moves with the predatory grace of a lioness.

The star of this production is the German director Lukas Hemleb, who has brought the script up to date without doing it violence. And he does exciting things with standard set flats. In moments of great embarrassment or confusion, actors freeze while the walls surrealistically contract and expand. In Act III, in Redillon's apartment, the stage is raked at such an extreme angle that the characters (some in spike heels) keep losing their footing, sliding downstage, clinging to each other like voyagers on a storm-tossed ship.

The exhibit "Gauguin-Tahiti, L'Atelier des Tropiques," at the Grand Palais until January 20, is a helpful guide to the perplexed admirers of impressionism and post-impressionism who resist Gauguin's last works because of their strange, sometimes grotesque, content.[1]

On the hundredth anniversary of Gauguin's death, the curators, Claires Frèches-Thory of the Musée d'Orsay, and George Shackleford of Boston's Fine Arts, have assembled fifty paintings, thirty sculptures, and sixty graphic works telling the story of Gauguin's sojourns in Tahiti (1891–1893, 1895–1901) and his time in the Marquesas where he died in 1903. Forty photographs in the first rooms, some taken in the 1860s by Henri Lemasson, George Spitz, and others, with supporting text, establish that Gauguin's paintings of the tropics are less fact than symbolic fiction. Upon first arriving in Papeete the artist attended the funeral of the last king of Tahiti, Pommard V. French missionaries had toppled the idols, and the ancient temples were in ruins. If Gauguin meant to discover a savage purity, or paint a paradise, he would have to make it out of relics and old pictures.

*Là est le temple* is a magnificent tribute to the lost civilization. The yellow hill that sweeps the breadth of the canvas is bare but for a tiny purple idol at the top right, almost lost against the purple mountains. The hill where the temple once stood is bursting with ghostly energy, despite the dark barrier of the fence topped with skulls in the foreground; the hill overpowers even the huge red and violet flowers on the near side of the fence.

The exhibit instructs us in Gauguin's pointed symbolism—mostly Christian symbolism imposed upon native figures and landscape—an artistic syncretism. *Je vous salue Marie* (1891) is an adoration scene in which two native girls prayerfully approach a haloed Tahitian madonna and child. In *Terre délicieuse* (1892) a naked Eve stands next to a multi-colored tree. A lizard on a branch, overshadowed by a brilliant red bird,

1 "Gauguin-Tahiti, L'Atelier des Tropiques," will be on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from February 29 through June 20, 2004.



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whispers the words of temptation into her ear while she plucks—instead of an apple—a flower resembling a peacock feather. In *Paroles du diable* (1892), the same woman, standing upon a swirling pool of pink, in shame covers her pubis, while a frowning tiki-faced devil looks out at us from behind her, as if considering how to tempt her further.

The core of the exhibit is Gauguin's largest canvas, the twelve-feet-by-four-feet *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons-nous?* (Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?). It was during his second stay in Tahiti in 1897, after a heart attack and a suicide attempt, that Gauguin commenced this painting which he conceived as his "testament," the ultimate expression of his wisdom about life and art. From right to left the twelve figures in shades of gold and pink represent the stages of life, from the peaceful infant in swaddling under the guardianship of three young women (one naked, with her back turned) to a sad old man with silver hair sitting naked far left, his hands covering his ears and one eye. Next to him is the celebrated Vairumati, Gauguin's most beautiful nude, a love goddess leaning on one arm toward the old man as if to tempt him.

The composition turns upon the central figure of a youth whose figure measures the canvas top to bottom, reaching up to pluck an apple. Midway between him and Vairumati is a standing idol, cobalt blue, and below him is a seated boy eating an apple. To right and left of the tawny youth are women: a sad matron in a purple robe gazing at him; two pink-robed women in a grotto considering the mystery of a red blossom. And over all—the deep Verona blue-green of trees and sky.

Surrounding *D'où venons-nous?* are seven paintings supposed to have been "studies" for the large canvas. Some, including the brilliant *Vairumati*, where the goddess lounges on a golden throne against a scarlet background, are superior to the mural.

The choice to display the earlier paintings and magical wooden sculptures from beginning to end as if to explain the gestation of this huge canvas that consumed the last five years of Gauguin's life, produces an anticlimax. Never mind that he considered it his greatest: *D'où venons-nous?* is grandiose, and a muddle. His palette—of unprecedented richness—finds its consummate balance and counterpoint in works such as *Jour délicieux* (1896), a portrait of several women standing in an orchard, their skirts a sonata of reds and purples; or the mysterious *Le Rêve* (1897), in which two dark women are seated on the floor of a dusky bedroom that opens upon a vibrant landscape—that may be an open door or an unframed painting. Gauguin's skills as a draftsman were best suited to this medium-sized format; when his drawing is overextended he loses control of his colors.

Of all the painting exhibitions in Paris (there is also a Vuillard show at the Grand Palais) perhaps none has caused more excitement here than the thirty Botticelli works that Daniel Arasse has hung and lighted so perfectly in the little Musée du Luxembourg. Natural light has not been used in this space for many years. The curator understood that these paintings of tempera on wood thrive in the sunlight and take their meaning from it.

The show is titled "Botticelli: de Laurent le Magnifique à Savonarole," but any political influence upon the paintings is negligible. If the madonnas grow sadder in the 1490s it seems likelier a result of the painter's aging muse than Savonarola's severe theocracy. Arasse appears to have two related intentions: to emphasize the unique effects of Botticelli's translucent medium, and to demonstrate his powers as a neoplatonic symbolist, a visual poet who used the effects of light to penetrate the surface of things and explore religious mysteries.

Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* was a pin-up in dormitory rooms when I was in college; his *Primavera* is one of the most popularly reproduced images of the Quattrocento. (Neither is here.) Our generation came to love his gently eroticized madonnas without knowing that anyone could feel otherwise



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about them. But in fact this Florentine artist, successful in his lifetime, was condemned to obscurity by the Mannerists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, only to be rescued from oblivion by Ruskin in the nineteenth. What offended connoisseurs in the interim were the eccentricities that now fascinate us. When Leonardo and others had mastered the use of shiny oils and the realistic details of anatomy, Botticelli went on working in the softer tempera, on wood, and distorted the human figure, elongating arms and fingers, tilting necks at impossible angles, as suited his peculiar purposes.

A round tondo placed at the entrance, *Vierge en adoration devant l'Enfant*, is a keynote for what is to follow. The blond Virgin, her long hands joined in prayer, swoons above the child, whose head rests on a spray of roses. Roses float above, and pale pink blossoms as glowing as the young virgin's cheeks. Next comes the *Madone à la roseraie* (from the Louvre), in which Mary's dark robe sets off the caress of the bright profiles of mother and child. Mary's faint halo, a golden filigree against the pale blue sky, and the roses next to it, are the source of the divine light that bathes the coral pink faces. I had never seen the magnificent *La Vierge à l'Enfant et un ange* from the Musée Fesch in Corsica. The fair-haired angel at the right is lifting the infant into Mary's arms. The rippling gold-stitched embroidery of the garment hems, upon the angel's powder-blue robe and Mary's of deep green, completes an overhanging pattern of festooned vines and fruits. Here the light source is somewhere above the viewer's left shoulder, but descends brilliantly via the faces of mother and child, as through a prism.

As if to wake us from a dream, to see that Botticelli's vision is not all sweetness and light, there appears a troubled Saint Augustine at his desk, contemplating the equilibrium of the miter and the astrolabe. He guards a nook where Arasse has hung a group of gory paintings on the subject of Judith and Holofernes: one with Judith bearing the severed head, another showing the bleeding, headless cadaver.

In the main salon are some portraits of young women in profile, long-necked, stark; but there is a beauty with peach-golden skin, and strawberry blond hair covered by a limpid coif. There is a dazzling *Portrait d'homme avec la médaille de Cosme l'Ancien*, in which a red-capped youth holds a large medallion against his black cloak—it appears to be real gold, blurring the line between art and reality. Also in this room are several large allegorical pictures on pagan subjects, including the tragic *Pallas et le centaure* wherein the goddess's pity for the monster is manifest.

But the showstopper is the enormous *L'Annonciation* (1481). The painting is twenty feet wide and eight feet tall and one is immediately struck by the great distance between the angel hovering outdoors far left with his huge white wings and Mary in her blue robe kneeling beneath a white lace valance at the right edge of the canvas, a corner of the bedroom. Gabriel is slightly larger than Mary is; they take up no more than an eighth of the surface area. Beyond a great expanse of checkered tile within the bedroom we see the large, elevated bed—with its single pillow. The painting is vertically divided by one of three ornate arches, the entrance to the Virgin's bedchamber. To the left of this arch a walkway leads up to garden and hills, the vanishing point. The long walkway and the bedroom floor, at right angles, are of equal length on the surface of the painting, creating the illusion of an immense interior.

The angel and his message are borne upon a scarcely visible beam of light whose source is the arch behind him. This light passes through the opening of the middle arch, narrowly suggested by a vertical stripe of rose, as from our human perspective we can neither see the source of divine inspiration, nor the passage of the sacred mystery (the Conception) through the astonished Virgin's bedroom door.



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Theater

# PETA politics, Dreamworks score

*by Mark Steyn*

The first thing to be said for L. Frank Baum is that he just got on with it. There is, clearly, a certain metaphorical power to characters with no brain, no heart, and no courage, but Baum, in the original *Wizard of Oz*, never belabored it. He told the story and left it to his many and varied adaptors over the last hundred years to obsess about meaning. Baum invented Oz while holding down his day job as editor of *Chicago Show Window*, a magazine for department-store window decorators—and no, he wasn't gay: the original friend of Dorothy was not a Friend of Dorothy. He's not the fanciest prose stylist, but he's brimming with strong, visual ideas: There's a terrific moment in the third book, *Ozma of Oz*, where Princess Ozma, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Cowardly Lion, the Hungry Tiger, the Saw-Horse, and the entire officer-heavy Royal Army cross the poisonous desert from the Land of Oz to the Land of Ev by means of a magic green carpet which unrolls under their feet as they advance and then rolls up again behind them—a very literal example of how Baum's work is one continuous rolling parade of fantastic episodes. And he's savvy enough to describe the scene from the viewpoint of Dorothy, watching from the window of a tower in Ev, where she's being held captive by the Princess Langwidere, who has fourteen detachable heads she likes to appear in and wishes to make Dorothy's the fifteenth.

That was the author's other great strength: Oz is populated by memorable characters, and Baum usually finds a way to make their dialogue vocally distinctive—Tiktok the Machine Man is the literary world's first robot, and the Highly Magnified Woggle-Bug endlessly irritates his companions with his penchant for labored puns. In *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, they're flying in a strange hybrid creature called the Gump—half-beast, half-sofa. The Scarecrow, for complicated reasons, has had his straw replaced by bills of various denominations, and, as he leans over the side of the Gump, the Tin Woodman worries he might fall out and hurt himself. Don't worry, says the Woggle-Bug. As he's stuffed with money, he can never be broke. Baum's books run on narrative energy, fantastic set-pieces, inventive characters, and bad jokes.

I thought of Baum's Oz a lot during *Wicked*, the new musical (at the Gershwin) by Stephen Schwartz (music and lyrics) and Winnie Holzman (book). It's adapted from Gregory Maguire's clever-clever novel of the same name, a "dark" prequel to Baum's tale and the famous film version of it. We are in Oz before Dorothy blows in from Kansas and where the locals look like they've just wandered in from one of the glummer bits of *Les Misérables*. We're not in Kansas anymore, but this is not your father's Oz, either. In the course of the evening, we'll learn how the Cowardly Lion, the Tin Man, and the Scarecrow came to be in their defi-



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cient states. More to the point, the elaborate flashback will tell us the tale of the two witches, Glinda—here called Galinda (Kristen Chenoweth)—and the green and gruesome Elphaba (Idina Menzel). We know them well. One is a Good Witch, the other a Wicked Witch. But are we sure we know which witch is which?

Sixty years ago, reviewing *Pal Joey* in *The New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson asked: "Can you draw sweet water from a foul well?" *Wicked* attempts to reverse the formula: Can you draw foul water from a sweet well? The film *Oz* offers the same message as an earlier song by its lyricist Yip Harburg, "It's Only A Paper Moon":

> "It's a Barnum and Bailey world
> Just as phoney as it can be
> But it wouldn't be make believe
> If you believed in me."

The wizard may be a charlatan, but, if Dorothy and her friends believe he can give them courage, brains, etc., then they'll find what they always had within themselves: that's a hopeful message. *Wicked* upends that Oz: hope is for suckers, and happiness is fake, a tyrannous illusion. The Wicked Witch, an outsider "misunderstood" because of the color of her skin, is the real good witch. Galinda the Good is a scheming bitch with no flair for witchcraft. The Wizard is not merely a fraud but a megalomaniac fascist ruling a totalitarian state that permits no dissent. Galinda becomes a flack for the Wizard's brutal regime, while Elphaba signs on with the resistance as a militant animal-rights activist, the whole Wicked Witch thing being a front for a rebel with a caw.

The plot is complicated but boring because, once you get the premise, all the rest is geometric re-positioning: the moral high ground is a fetid swamp, light is dark, good is evil, normal is weird, weird is normal—although, to anyone who's read Baum, in Oz it always was. There are jokes along the way, many of them contemporary equivalents—i.e., campier and ruder—of Baum's own taste in stage comedy, or efficient deployments of our prior knowledge. Galinda shouting directions to a passing traveler in the wings: "That's right. You just take that one road the whole time." Elphaba sneers at Dorothy: "Take a dead woman's shoes? Must've been raised in a barn!" Though the biggest yuks come when the clever-clogs retake riffs off the original, Winnie Holzman gamely keeps her end up throughout. Instead of Woggle-Bug-type wordplay, we get doubles entendres. A propos a fleeing four-footed friend: "There's a goat on the lam." Miss Holzman at least gives the impression she had fun writing the show. You can't say the same of the songs.

There's a predictable pattern to children's fables these days. A few years ago, I asked Tim Rice, who'd just written the lyrics for Disney's *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, why he wasn't doing *Pocahontas*. "Well, the minute they mentioned it," he said, "I knew the Brits would be the bad guys. I felt it was my patriotic duty to decline." Sure enough, in the film, John Smith and his men are the bringers of environmental devastation to the New World, at least until Captain Smith comes to learn from Pocahontas how to "Paint With All The Colors Of The Wind." *Wicked* is meant to be gleefully ironic, but there's a sourness deep within and you can't subvert the clichés of Oz when you're mired in a political correctness quite as oppressive as latterday Disney and all the more stultifying because this is, supposedly, a show for adults. It's PETA politics with a Dreamworks score.

The songs, by the lyricist of *Pocahontas*, Stephen Schwartz, have a few shots at Harburgian wordplay:

> "Let us rejoicify that goodness could subdue
> The wicked workings of you-know-who . . ."

And the kind of exhibitionist rhyming that shrivels away to nothing on even casual examination. Galinda to Elphaba:

> "Don't be offended by my frank analysis
> Think of it as personality dialysis."



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Schwartz, composer of *Godspell* and *Pippin*, lyricist of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, is an odd choice for inverting Oz. The playfulness of Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg doesn't come naturally to him; he's too earnest to translate the novel's maliciousness into musical form, and his title ideas are uniformly weak. Even when the lyrics strain valiantly for sparkle, the music remains trapped in that foursquare *Pocahontas* follow-your-heart plonking power-pop ponderousness. You realize belatedly what adroit child's-eye character-writing there is in

> "Somewhere Over The Rainbow
> Skies are blue."

You can't subvert *The Wizard of Oz* if you can't match its score.

The Judy Garland *Wizard* was not the first musical adaptation: that honor goes to Baum's own stage version, with rather dreary music by Paul Tietjens and A. Baldwin Sloane, various interpolations by other hands, and a book heavily dependent on the broad clown comedy of Montgomery and Stone as the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman. Dorothy was something of a secondary figure, and the Cowardly Lion was little more than a bit part. But it made stars of Montgomery and Stone and was the hit of the 1902–1903 Broadway season, until it was eclipsed by the producers' own follow-up, *Babes in Toyland*, which has proved more enduring. Nevertheless, Baum made so much money from the Broadway version that he wrote the second Oz book with the stage in mind, eliminating Dorothy and the Lion entirely to give Montgomery and Stone even bigger parts. Only after the second Oz show flopped did Baum realize the books were the heart of the fantasy and knuckle down to writing the series without an eye to which vaudevillians might be available for leading roles.

By my reckoning, *Wicked* is at least the eighth Oz musical. There were Baum's own adaptations of his sequels, one of which, *The Tik-Tok Man of Oz* (1913), has an unusual score by Louis Gottschalk. And at the other end of the spectrum we have *The Patchwork Girl of Oz* (1988) by lumbering London leftie Adrian Mitchell (lyricist of the popular anti-Thatcher rant "Fuck-Off Friday"). When MGM came to make the third film version of the original book, they wisely ignored the 1902 adaptation and ordered up a new score from Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg. Harburg's principal contribution is summed up in the title of a recent biography by his son: *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz?* In Baum's book, there was no rainbow for Dorothy to be over. Because Harburg was, by comparison with mainstream Hollywood limousine liberalism, a hardcore committed political writer, it was assumed that he must have had various socialist sub-texts going on in there. That in turn prompted a whole slew of retrospective scholarship about Baum's *Oz*. According to Henry Littlefield in 1964, the original book is a political parable about the failures of the Populist movement of the 1890s, when a viable mass coalition of farmers (the Scarecrow) and heavy industry (the Tin Man) was thwarted by the duplicitousness of Wall Street (the Wicked Witch of the East) and the faintheartedness of William Jennings Bryan (the Cowardly Lion). In exposing the federal government as an impotent humbug (the Wizard), Baum was arguing for a radical political transformation in America.

Whatever. By that stage, Oz was such a cultural touchstone that anyone could find an angle on it. In the Seventies, there was a black version, *The Wiz*, with dull songs, subsequently filmed with Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. It's utterly forgotten now but at the time was fiercely loathed by Harburg, who wrote to a friend linking Oz's friend to other symptoms of decay:

> "From Roosevelt to Nixon
> From The Wizard to The Wiz
> My God, it can't be possible
> But oh, my country, 'tis."

But blacks and 1890s Populists are as



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nothing to the homosexuals, whose embrace of Judy Garland in her long decline made Oz a sacred relic in a cult of masochistic camp. It's not merely in the Australian sense that the new biotuner of Peter Allen at the Imperial is called *The Boy From Oz*. Young Mr. Allen was (more or less simultaneously) Judy's pianist, her husband's lover, and her daughter's husband. Before his death from AIDS, he became the Liberace of the disco era and also wrote such archetypal hits of the period as "I Honestly Love You" for Olivia Newton-John. In this musical biography, "I Honestly Love You" is sung to Peter by the ghost of his dead boyfriend, which probably is more dramatic weight than an Olivia Newton-John pop ballad can bear, though connoisseurs of camp will treasure the moment. In different ways, *The Boy From Oz* and *Wicked* are both engaged in the same exercise, turning the Oz myth upside down to expose its murky underbelly. The boy from Oz, like the girl from Kansas, is lost in a strange world of deficient creatures: miring Liza Minnelli in her own pathologies as a toxic inheritance, Judy has no brain; blithely rogering his step-daughter's husband, Judy's spouse Mark Herron has no heart; and, unable to resist her mother's scheming, Liza has no courage. "I'm not marrying you, I'm marrying her," Peter Allen insists to his mother-in-law-to-be.

Judy appraises him coolly. "If only that were true," she replies. Her father, two husbands, and now a son-in-law were all Friends of Dorothy, though not such good friends of Judy as it turned out. The author, Martin Sherman, is a gay American playwright based in London whom I used to run in to around town from time to time. He's a very smart guy and *The Boy From Oz* is undoubtedly the dumbest thing he's ever written. You wish he'd run with his title a little bit harder: Peter Allen was a big bloke from the outback who found his Emerald City in America; like the Wizard, he was mostly a charlatan—"I Honestly Love You" is an anemic love song, "Everything Old Is New Again" is a cheesy attempt at an anthemic showbiz valentine; in this production, the big splashy 11 o'clock number, "I Go To Rio," is a triumph of presentation that exhausts its thin material. But in its uncomplicatedly trashy way this show has the measure of its modest subject.

*Wicked*, on the other hand, is a disappointment because it arrives trailing clouds of glory. The novel was much admired, though I found its 400 pages of literary tricksiness a postmodern jest too indigestible to finish: Sondheim mined similar terrain in *Into The Woods*, but riffing off familiar fairy-tale characters who exist in a hundred anonymous versions is less perilous than a direct assault on another man's work, particularly an author as prolifically inventive as Baum. If the musical can't seem to locate the spirit of the novel, that may be because there isn't any. Seen in the wake of *The Boy From Oz*, you could make a case for *Wicked* as a kind of exorcism, of the lingering embarrassment of Garland's Oz in gay mythology, written by a novelist who is the very model of contemporary gay respectability, raising his children with his partner in Massachusetts. But the show, struggling to get out from under its $14 million budget, doesn't quite trust the source material and so rides off in all directions—though the novel was aimed at grown-ups, the score is an uncomplicated pitch for the *Lion King* crowd, the book ransacks your affection for the movie and leaves it feeling slightly soiled, the choreography (by Wayne Cilento) belongs in the Peter Allen show, and the oppressive design (by Eugene Lee and Susan Hilferty) seems to be a trial run for a Harry Potter musical: most of the First Act is set at the University of Shiz, where Galinda and Elphaba are room-mates, a prom queen and a green geek both studying witchcraft. I don't suppose Maguire intended his novel to be realized quite so Hogwartishly, but the Act One broomstick finale trembles on the brink of breaking into a game of Quidditch. In their determination to lighten up Maguire's darker threads, they've wound up not just sanitizing the



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thing but sanitizing it incoherently. Joe Mantello's dogged direction emphasizes the hollowness: no heart, no brain, and lacking (as the Cowardly Lion would say) da noive, but plenty of smooth metallic sheen, stuffing, and self-lionizing.

That said, what both *Wicked* and *The Boy From Oz* have going for them is star performances. At *Oz*, it's hard not to warm to Hal Jackman's Peter Allen. Best known as Wolverine from the X-Men movies, Jackman beefily essays Allen's trademark high kicks and almost succeeds in persuading you that this is a tale worth your attention and that the telling of it does it justice. Almost. He's helped by the apparent disdain of the supporting cast—the Judys and Lizas rendered as crude cartoons, who seem to feel the Aussie hunk isn't worth interacting with. In this show, being cut by the bit-players is an advantage. I don't expect it to outrun Jackman's one-year contract.

At *Wicked*, Kristen Chenoweth and Idina Menzel have a good witch/bad witch routine down pat that the audience loves. Miss Chenoweth is a Broadway Reese Witherspoon: a cute blonde kitten with the clear girlish bell of an operetta soprano, the poise of a spoiled cheerleader, and a gleeful awareness of her killer charms. Had she come along a century ago or at any point in the sixty years thereafter, she'd have cleaned up. But *Cats* and Co. gave producers a taste for shows that aren't vulnerable to the vagaries of human performance, and so Miss Chenoweth has had a hard time finding anything that will finally, definitively, allow the audience to fall in love with her. At last it's happened. In this show, everything she does, every toss of her curls, every wicked smile, the lamest of one-liners gets a delirious audience reaction. Her comic timing is lethal: when Elphaba is in a bad mood, Galinda declares, "The artichoke is steamed!" And the house collapses. But over the course of the evening something goes wonky: reluctant to lose a laugh and play anything for real, Chenoweth lets her character degenerate into a cartoon: a prom queen turned ice queen. You're amused but there's no after-taste, and the notion that this is a "real" Galinda as opposed to the idealized Baum vision is simply laughable. The tall, green-hued Menzel has an earthy attitude: "We might as well get this over with," she announces upon her entrance. "Yes, I've always been green." Kermit the Frog covered this turf thirty years ago: It isn't easy being green. Not when you're a sexually liberated woman with socially progressive views and a wheelchair-bound sibling. But a duel between a PC cliché-collision and a cupcake cutout hardly repays attention.

Among the other players, Joel Grey as the Wizard chugs along in low gear. I think he's meant to make us think of Bush or John Ashcroft, but his heart isn't really in lumpy lines like "Where I come from, everyone knows the best way to bring folks together is to give them a really good enemy." Spelled out in black and white, his wickedness toward Oz's four-footed denizens reads like a political tract, but delivered by Grey, hungry for love, it never seriously discombobulates you.

"It's not lying," says someone in *Wicked*. "It's looking at things another way." Fair enough. But the bloated parasitism on display here is a cautionary tale in what's gone wrong with the American musical. L. Frank Baum was a natural: his books sometimes misfire—the second one certainly suffers from the absence of Dorothy—but he kept on going and the collected works form a wholly realized, fully populated fantasy. In attempting an intellectual jape on the back of it, Maguire makes you appreciate what Baum didn't do: weight down the story with politics far more simplistic than any children's tale. Fourteen million dollars, a Tony-winning composer, a hot sitcom writer, and the theater's busiest director later, what survives does not enchant, does not transport. The flying monkeys rocket out across the orchestra, but you're always aware of the man behind the curtain.



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Art

# The "Blue Rider" imbroglio

*by Hilton Kramer*

Like many of the avant-garde groups that broke away from existing institutions in the early years of the twentieth century, the circle of modernist painters that came to be known as the *Blue Rider* in Munich in 1911 owed its existence to a quarrel with authority. In the case of the *Blue Rider* painters, however, the quarrel was not with a benighted academy but with another artists' group—the New Artists Association of Munich—that had been founded only two years earlier, in 1909, to foster the fortunes of the avant-garde. No less a modernist firebrand than the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky had been elected president of the New Artists group, yet this did not prevent the chairman of its exhibition committee from summarily rejecting a large abstract painting by Kandinsky—his *Composition V* (1911)—that had been submitted to the Association's third exhibition in 1911. Kandinsky's newly emergent art of abstraction proved to be too radical even for the "advanced" standards of the New Artists Association.

It was this rejection that prompted Kandinsky to resign his presidency and organize the *Blue Rider* as an alternative avant-garde, and in this endeavor he was joined by two German painters—Gabriele Münter and Franz Marc—who had also been members of the New Artist Association. They were soon joined by two other Russians—Alexei von Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin. None but Kandinsky was an abstractionist, yet they nonetheless looked upon Kandinsky as their leader, and it is one of the curiosities of *Blue Rider* history, which has long been associated with the birth of abstraction, that Kandinsky remained the only dedicated abstractionist in the group. So swiftly did this imbroglio in the ranks of the Munich avant-garde unfold that the first *Blue Rider* exhibition opened on the same day and in the same space—the Moderne Galerie Tannhauser—where the last exhibition of the New Artists Association closed.

It has to be remembered that in the early decades of the twentieth century virtually all of the world's established museums were firmly closed to modernist endeavors. Artists of this controversial persuasion were thus obliged to organize their own exhibitions. In the German-speaking art world, these artists were often called Secessionists; in France, and subsequently in the United States, they called themselves Independents. Some of these exhibitions were mounted on a huge scale. This was the period in which Roger Fry and his Bloomsbury friends organized the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in London, in 1910, and a similar group of American artists and critics—among them, Robert Henri, Walter Pach, Walt Kuhn, and Arthur B. Davies—organized the Armory Show in New York in 1913. The latter, in turn, was much influenced by the 1912 Sonderbund exhibition in Cologne, which the Americans took as their model.

While the two exhibitions organized by the *Blue Rider*—Munich 1911, Berlin 1912—



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were far more modest in scale, they were similarly conceived to embrace an international avant-garde. In the first, the School of Paris was represented by Robert Delaunay and the revered but already deceased Henri Rousseau, and the Russian avant-garde by the Burliuk brothers as well as Kandinsky, who published his manifesto in defense of abstract painting, *On the Spiritual in Art*, at the same time. The American avant-garde was represented, somewhat lamely, by a single painter, Albert Bloch, who is mainly remembered today, to the extent that he is remembered at all, for his brief association with the *Blue Rider* group. The 1912 show in Berlin added Picasso, Braque, Vlaminck, and Klee to the *Blue Rider*'s roster, but by then the *Blue Rider* was already unraveling as a distinct group, and the outbreak of the first World War, in which both Franz Marc and August Macke perished in combat, brought its short-lived history to a close. Kandinsky, who had given the group its name with his drawing of a blue rider on horseback for the cover of the *Blue Rider Almanac*, remained its one and only major artist.

It is another of the curiosities that marked the *Blue Rider's* brief existence that its first exhibition had included some paintings by the Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg. This was done mainly at the behest of Kandinsky, who had a keen interest in modern music and devoted the closing paragraphs of *On the Spiritual in Art* to a discussion of it, placing Schoenberg's use of dissonance in the context of the innovations of Wagner, Moussorgsky, Debussy, and Scriabin, and by implication equating Schoenberg's dissonant aesthetic with his own venture into the aesthetics of abstraction. Indeed, what Kandinsky said of Schoenberg's achievement in music—that he "has already discovered mines of new beauty in his search for spiritual structure"—simply repeated Kandinsky's claims for his own achievement in painting.

Whether or not it is intellectually legitimate to insist upon the existence of some vaguely defined "spiritual structure" that can be said to unite atonal music and abstract painting is a question I shall leave to the music critics to determine. As a practical matter, however, it is clearly something that Kandinsky firmly believed, and it was on that basis that Schoenberg was invited to exhibit his paintings with the *Blue Rider* group. It didn't seem to matter that as a painter Schoenberg was hardly in the same league as the other *Blue Rider* painters. As a modernist painter, he was in fact an amateur. It was only in his more conventional portraits and self-portraits that Schoenberg succeeded in attaining what may be called a professional level in pictorial art, but these pictures have little, if any, aesthetic kinship with Kandinsky's abstractions or with avant-garde art of any persuasion.

If there were ever any doubts about this, they have been definitely put to rest in the exhibition that has lately been organized in "Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider" at the Jewish Museum in New York.[1] To state the matter as politely as possible, this is a very odd exhibition. Not surprisingly, its principal strength is to be found in its selection of Kandinsky's early abstract expressionist paintings, among them the splendid *Impression III (Concert)* (1911), which he produced as a tribute to Schoenberg upon hearing the latter's music for the first time. But except for the eleven Kandinskys, the representation of the rest of the *Blue Rider* circle is rather patchy, with only two important paintings by Franz Marc and only one by August Macke. There is also a single picture by Albert Bloch, some good examples of Gabriele Münter, Kandinsky's companion at the time, whose delicate landscapes and genre scenes are lovely but modest in ambition, and four examples of Jawlensky's Germano-Russian Fauve pictures.

1 "Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider" opened at The Jewish Museum, New York, on October 24, 2003 and remains on view through February 12, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Esther da Coseta Meyer and Fred Wasserman, has been published by Scala Books (208 pages, $39.95).



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But then, there are the Schoenberg pictures, thirty-six of them, which effectively capsize the exhibition, reducing the show's high-art pretensions to the level of an historical documentary. It doesn't help, either, that visitors to the exhibition are invited to listen to audio tapes of Schoenberg's music while studying the paintings, or that there is a CD of some Schoenberg performances tucked into the hard-cover copies of the show's elaborate catalogue. It adds nothing to our appreciation of Schoenberg's music, which requires close concentration, to hear it performed in the presence of his amateur pictorial efforts. No doubt the organizers of "Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider" meant well, but this show is the kind of experiment that should not be repeated.

# Exhibition note

"Jean-Antoine Houdon: Sculptor of the Enlightenment," at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, November 4, 2003–January 25, 2004

At the beginning of the twentieth century, younger sculptors such as Brancusi complained that Rodin loomed so large that they couldn't move forward. "Nothing can grow in the shadow of tall trees," he said upon quitting the master's atelier. Sometimes it seems that Rodin blocks our view of the past, too, keeping sculptors who preceded him just out of reach. No one has suffered more from this neglect than Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828), the greatest sculptor between Bernini and Rodin, who admired Houdon enormously. There has been no monograph for nearly thirty years about Houdon's work and no retrospective in even longer.

This neglect is all the more strange since Houdon is a fixture of our national consciousness, thanks to his canonical likenesses of the country's founders and early patriots —figures such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and John Paul Jones. Indeed, we are daily in more intimate contact with him than with any other artist, for Houdon's likeness of Jefferson adorns the nickel coin.

Happily, this wrong has been righted in the splendid show that Anne Poulet (the newly appointed director of the Frick Collection) has organized. It opened at the National Gallery this past spring and is now at the Getty through January.[1] Besides including the Americans and his signature portraits of Voltaire, the show runs the gamut of Houdon's career, beginning with student works such as the *Ecorché*, or flayed male nude, through mature works such as his portraits of Diderot, Gluck, and members of the *ancien régime*'s aristocracy as well as allegorical subjects such as *La Frileuse*, and ending with his post-Revolutionary portraits of Napoleon and Josephine that show him subtly accommodating his prodigious talent to the stifling dictates of Neoclassicism.

Surprising as it may seem, Houdon's stature is not, even now, a matter of settled opinion. Although he did concede that Houdon possessed an "astonishing" ability to capture his sitters, the British art historian Michael Levey, writing on eighteenth-century France in the prestigious (and influential) *Pelican History of Art* series, opined that history had singled out Houdon "not without some concomitant unfairness to great sculptors [of the time] and with some slight overestimation of Houdon's own abilities." The sculptor, he said, possessed a "highly competent yet essentially uninventive talent."

It is true that Houdon wasn't sui generis, much as the unique force and realism of his work may make him seem that way today. In fact, Houdon was part of a tradition, his work the climax of a century of sculpted portraits in France. Like his predecessors, Houdon took as his point of departure Bernini's "speaking likeness"—portraits that at-

1 The exhibition will next travel to the Musée National du Château de Versailles, France, from March 1 through May 30, 2004. It was previously on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. from May 4 to September 7, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the University of Chicago Press (400 pages, $85).



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tain such a pitch of realism as to suggest a Pygmalion-like transformation from artistic representation to living, breathing human being. Like them, he was a vivid depictor of physiognomy, character, and the inner life of his sitters. And, along with some of his predecessors and contemporaries, he sculpted creative artists and men of letters, not just the aristocracy.

But Houdon's distinctive achievement was to distill and deepen the legacy of Bernini's speaking likeness, elevating it to such a level of verisimilitude as to shock his contemporaries—some of whom thought Houdon had crossed the line of propriety—and introducing an unprecedented depth in his readings of man's inner life. The eighteenth century was not short of great portrait sculptors: Antione Coysevox, Guillaume Coustou, Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, and Jean-Jacques Caffieri among them. But they are all Algardis to Houdon's Bernini.

In pursuit of his aesthetic vision, Houdon stripped the sculpted portrait of its accumulated rhetoric and anything else that obtruded on his primary goal: the revelation of the sitter's character. In earlier portraits of the era, clothing, wigs and other personal adornments often indicated social status at the expense of personality. By contrast, Houdon shows many of his sitters from the neck up and unadorned. When he does show them dressed, Houdon is careful to "weight" his depictions. In his 1792 portrait of Antoine Louis (co-inventor of the guillotine), the clothing and hair are somewhat generalized in treatment but the face is rendered in full detail, so that while we have some idea of where he stands in society, we are in no doubt about who he is as a man. Similarly, where Houdon's predecessors were partial to bravura effects—high wire acts of carving hair, lace filigree, and the like—Houdon only rarely (as in the finely pleated linen cravat on his 1804 bust of the inventor Robert Fulton) indulged in such tours de force of carving for their own sake.

But Houdon's transformation of the eighteenth-century portrait went beyond externals. Bernini and his followers in France had captured the individual at a peak moment, as if in response to a call or some other outside stimulus. Houdon transformed the sculpted portrait by portraying his sitters as if animated by some inner impulse and, more, as if caught in the instant of transition between one psychological state and another. His *Diderot* (1771) appears caught halfway between reaction and action, thought and speech. The face of *Armand-Thomas Hue, Marquis de Miromesnil* (1777) registers emotions ranging from empathy to hauteur, depending on what angle you view it from. In Houdon's work, the outside is a function of the inside—what happens on the sitter's face is determined by what's going on inside his or her mind at that moment. This emphasis on the individual, moreover one animated by an inner psychological impulse, is what speaks to us most forcefully today. His art is a watershed in the history of art. In the portraits by his predecessors and contemporaries, we see figures from the past. In Houdon's work, for the first time, we begin to see ourselves.

Houdon's portrait of Diderot was shown at the Salon of 1771, his first work publicly exhibited after returning to Paris in 1768 after four years studying at the Académie de France in Rome. It created a sensation, recognized at once as representing a revolutionary approach to portraiture. In other words, Houdon's apprenticeship was astonishingly short; he went from student to fully formed artist in about seven years. How? The four years in Rome had formed the building blocks of his art. While there, he studied the antique and Bernini's portraits. From the latter and Roman Republican portraiture he would have learned that the area on the body between crown and thorax could be as capable of expression as a fully articulated sculpted human figure that the ancients had left behind. He also dissected corpses, thereby discovering and then, in the *Ecorché*, showing that he had mastered, the musculature of the head, the subcutaneous array of ropes and pulleys that articulates a



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person's face, giving it character and expression. For most artists, the *Ecorché* was an academic set piece, merely a footnote to their career. Not Houdon. Seeing this one in the show makes one feel in the presence of the touchstone of his art.

Out of these experiences came a new conception of the portrait. Beginning with Diderot, Houdon's portraits depart from precedent in that every square millimeter of the head and face is marshaled in the revelation of character. Earlier portraitists had relied on the eyes—"the windows of the soul"—to be the carriers of insight and expression. But Houdon gives equal attention to the lower half of the face, the soft, fleshy area surrounding the mouth, the cheeks, the jowls, and the neck. Cover the eyes of any of Houdon's portraits, and you will still come away with a clear picture of the sitter's personality: Franklin pinched and persnickety; Voltaire emphatic but circumspect; the Revolutionary minister of war Charles-François du Périer remorseless. No one else in art had done anything like this.

In Houdon's Roman years we get our first glimpse of one of Houdon's most remarkable traits and what was to be one of the most powerful weapons in his creative arsenal: what you might call his prehensile eye. In the catalog entry to the 1767 *St. John the Baptist*, an early commission, Houdon is quoted in a letter explaining that he had spotted the ideal model outside St. Peter's but had been rebuffed when he had asked him to pose. So instead, "I studied him carefully and stored it in my head as well as I possibly could." This was to be his lifelong practice. Houdon never made sketches or preparatory drawings of his sitters. Instead, through vision alone, he captured the varied, evanescent expressions of his sitters and held them in his mind throughout the long process of transferring them to sculpture. Houdon's art embraces two extremes, the mechanical and the intuitive. To attain absolute fidelity to external appearance, he took measurements and casts of his sitters' heads and faces. But life casting is by nature a static enterprise, good only for recording the face in repose. It could only take him so far in his quest to replicate the truth of his sitters. And Houdon's aim was to capture their inner truth, a truth revealed incrementally and on the fly by a face animated by consciousness and in near-continuous motion. For that, Houdon had only his eye, his hand, and his memory to guide him.

It's often said that there's no such thing as a perfect exhibition, uncertainties of securing loans being what they are. But it must be said that if there is one, this is it. Ms. Poulet has obtained just about every significant Houdon sculpture extant, winnowing the selection carefully to secure the version closest to the artist's hand and eliminating lesser ones, pirated casts, and outright fakes. The catalogue is a feat of comprehensive and scrupulous research as well as an enthralling exercise in connoisseurship. Taken together, they give us the definitive portrait of Houdon—a speaking likeness, as it were.

—*Eric Gibson*

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# Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Music

# New York chronicle

*by Jay Nordlinger*

In the recent period, we heard a slew of pianists, including Alicia de Larrocha—whom we will not be hearing again, at least not on these shores. This Spanish titan bade farewell to the U.S. in appearances with the New York Philharmonic. But we will get to those in a moment. First consider another great pianist, the Hungarian Zoltán Kocsis. He appeared twice in New York, first in a series with the Philharmonic, then in solo recital at the 92nd Street Y. Kocsis is a man of prodigious technique and solid musicianship. He is sometimes compared to Sviatoslav Richter, and, in fact, the late Soviet pianist invited Kocsis to play four-hand music with him—a considerable honor.

Kocsis is gaining increasing renown as a conductor, but luckily he is not neglecting his instrument. With the Philharmonic, he played Bartók's Concerto No. 3, the last work that composer ever wrote. Kocsis is a Bartók specialist, as he may be expected to be, given his nationality. But he also "specializes" in Debussy and many other composers, being a pianist of versatility. The Bartók Third is a gentle, lyrical, quasi-Mozartean work—or at least it can be. Kocsis, in partnership with the conductor Lorin Maazel, took a different approach. He was aggressive, propulsive—classically Bartókian, in a word. The final movement was quite fast and extraordinarily precise. Kocsis is the same phenom he always was, even if his mass of hair has turned gray.

His recital consisted of Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt. It began with Beethoven's Sonata in E minor, Op. 90, a seldom performed work. Kocsis gave it a strong reading, so typical of this pianist. It was bold, virile, and straight-ahead. But it was also overly blunt in spots, and included some pounding. Among the Liszt pieces was the intricate and popular "Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este." For all Kocsis's glory in Impressionistic music, this was not a terribly Impressionistic account—not an especially delicate, or limpid, or nuanced one. The villa's waters were a little heavy-running and undancing. But the technique, of course, was unquestionable, and Kocsis knows his own mind, playing with extreme assurance.

Good as Kocsis's first half was—and much of it was very good—nothing could have prepared the listener for the second half of the recital. It was devoted to a single work, Schubert's late sonata in B flat, D. 960. As it happened, New Yorkers would hear this work twice more in the space of two weeks, from major pianists. But I am coming to that. The traversal of Zoltán Kocsis was nothing less than great. He played with intelligence and soul. There was freedom of interpretation, but also an awareness of Schubertian restraints. The opening movement was poetic and transfixing. The Andante was blessedly not slow—and also transfixing. The Scherzo was unusually fast, but not so fast that it did not contain its lilt and pleasure. The concluding



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Allegro—a hard movement to get right—was splendidly judged. We all knew that Kocsis was a great pianist, but this was awesome confirmation. As the audience applauded, I turned to the critic sitting behind me and said, "Frankly, that's some of the best piano playing I have ever heard." He said, "Same with me."

Another pianist rumbling through town was András Schiff—another Hungarian (and when Hungary runs out of pianists, the Eskimos will have run out of ice). He appeared in recital at Carnegie Hall, playing three Bach suites, interspersed with a late, great Beethoven sonata and a suite from his, and Kocsis's, great countryman, Bartók. Schiff had a strangely uneven outing. The first of the Bach works was the French Suite No. 4 in E-flat major. Schiff was deficient in clarity and lyricism. Moreover, his hands and arms were tight (as they often are), which affected his sound. (This tightness is not merely a matter of technical hindrance, although it is that.) Bach's Sarabande was rather punched at. But the pianist did some things well, bringing out the inner voices, and, in the Gigue, taking obvious delight in the composer's unusual rhythms.

That Beethoven sonata was the one in A flat, Op. 110. In the first movement, Schiff emitted a cold, metallic sound. Furthermore, he tended to hit notes—more punching—where more of a caress would have been appropriate. Odd as it may sound, Schiff committed some downright ugly playing in this profound and beautiful score—and he is one of the most celebrated pianists in the world. Even the intelligence with which he combated the thorny fugue that ends the sonata could not rescue this performance from its depredations.

Schiff did not get much better in Bach's Partita No. 2, in C minor. In the (opening) Sinfonia, he did some rushing, and his execution was wanting. And the Capriccio (which concludes the suite) was a complete mess—a complete technical mess. It was actually amateurish, which, again, is a shocking thing to say about a pianist of Schiff's stature. But the Bartók suite—*Out of Doors*—was magnificent. Here the pianist fully justified his large reputation. The movements of this suite were duly percussive, lulling, painterly, or dazzling, according to the music's demands. The printed program ended with the final Bach work, the English Suite No. 6 in D minor. Schiff treated it better than he had the previous Bach suites, but not as well as he treated Bartók's.

Encores? The first was Chopin's Nocturne in F-sharp major, and it was truly superb. Shiveringly beautiful. The second was some more Bach, some music from the Partita No. 1 in B flat, including the delightful Gigue, which was clod-hoppingly heavy and offensive. And then Schubert's iconic Impromptu in G-flat major, which Schiff rendered adequately. Such a strange, strange night.

At Alice Tully Hall, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center offered an excellent concert of Brahms, Edgar Meyer (a young American), and Schubert (the familiar "Trout" Quintet). The pianist in this program was André Watts, who participated in the Brahms Trio in A minor for clarinet, cello, and piano, plus the "Trout." Watts—whose mother was Hungarian, incidentally—is known as a whiz-bang virtuoso. But, by the evidence of this particular afternoon, he deserves more of a reputation as a chamber musician than, to my knowledge, he has thus far enjoyed. His work in the Brahms was sensitive and wise, and he fulfilled his role in the "Trout" with both lyricism and panache. Man cannot live by Liszt concertos alone.

A few days later, the French pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet—about whom I have rhapsodized in these pages—played Saint-Saëns's Concerto No. 2 with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande (under its newish music director Pinchas Steinberg). This is a somewhat bombastic work, and Thibaudet is skilled at taming bombast: I have noted this in, for example, an account of Richard Strauss's *Burleske*. Certainly, Thibaudet began his go at the Saint-Saëns very well:



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playing richly, applying his palette of colors. Normally, this is about the most fluid pianist alive. But, midway through the first movement, some tightness set in, noticeable particularly in the right-hand passagework. The dancing, much-loved Scherzo lacked fleetness and grace. Also, Thibaudet missed a ton of notes, which is unusual for him. The final movement had its due fury, and the pianist executed some terrific trills (this is a trill-laden movement). But the playing could have been much more stylish, and Thibaudet could have avoided such errors as rushing and pounding. A curious outing from one of the finest pianists before the public today.

The Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, and Thibaudet, had performed in Avery Fisher Hall. Not long after, the Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes gave a recital in this same hall, proving that Avery Fisher's acoustics are not so bad that a good pianist cannot overcome them. Andsnes had no trouble making himself heard, with his various colors and voices. Opening the program were the three Romances of Schumann, surgingly Romantic, and also ruminative and discursive. Andsnes tends to play with great seriousness. I think of this as a kind of aural furrowed brow. Such earnestness can be endearing, but, every now and then, it would be nice to have more of a smile (musically speaking, of course). I should note, too—talking of taming—that Andsnes has a way of reining in Romantic music, injecting it with discipline, not letting it get away from him. This is an invaluable quality.

Following the Romances was more Schumann, his *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (*Carnival Jest from Vienna*), a splendid test of a pianist's mettle. You need virtuosity and musicality, and Andsnes had plenty of both. He played exceptionally clearly, not permitting the work to be heard as so much Schumann piano noise. After intermission, Andsnes offered that Schubert sonata: the B-flat sonata, D. 960. His performance may not have had the transcendence of Zoltán Kocsis's, but it was first-rate and memorable. Andsnes did not try to make the work profound; he knows that it is profound, already. He simply let it be itself.

Leon Fleisher? His story is well known, but I will retell it briefly. He was a widely acclaimed young pianist of the 1950s and 1960s. At the zenith of his career, he lost the use of his right arm, owing to a neurological disorder. He turned to teaching, conducting, and music for the left hand alone. Slowly, slowly, he has returned to some two-handed repertory. Now seventy-five, he played with both hands at Carnegie Hall for the first time since 1947. (The program was a mixture of two-handed music and left-hand music.) This was a great night, certainly emotionally, and often musically.

Fleisher began his recital the way pianists often used to, but seldom do now: with a transcription of a Bach piece. He played Egon Petri's version of *Sheep May Safely Graze*, and he did so with a startling purity. He missed a number of notes, and his right hand did not want to cooperate. But he worked the inner voices, and Bach's music had the divine peace that it should.

The pianist later returned to Bach, but he first traversed the work of four American composers: Dina Koston, George Perle, Leon Kirchner, and Roger Sessions. Many composers have written left-hand-alone music for him, just as many wrote such music for Paul Wittgenstein, the famous pianist (brother of the philosopher) who lost his right arm in World War I. In fact, Kirchner said, describing the origin of his *For the Left Hand*, "Leon Fleisher is an old friend. He needed music for the left hand. I stopped whatever I was doing at the time to write a piece for him."

When Fleisher played with the left hand alone, at Carnegie Hall, he had a special authority and confidence. Obviously, he has developed tremendous facility with his left hand alone, knowing, for example, how to follow and bring out the melody (and not merely with the thumb). In the second Bach work—a transcription of the famous D-minor Chaconne for violin, fashioned by no



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less a personage than Johannes Brahms—Fleisher delivered a left-hand tour de force. He accorded this work, this transcription, a certain modesty, to go with masterliness and finally majesty (albeit a spiritual majesty, not a pomp-filled one). The Chaconne was exquisitely calibrated, with each phrase and section given the proper weight. Like so many other people, I have heard Bach's Chaconne a thousand times, from violinists (including great ones), orchestras, etc. Never have I heard a more moving performance.

And then, after intermission, Fleisher played . . . that touchstone sonata by Schubert. He did some impressive playing in it, but the limitations of his right hand were apparent. In the last movement, especially, he seemed tired, with the right-hand octaves defeating him, or at least vexing him. But his musicianship—and all that accumulated wisdom—was more important than his technical wherewithal. The audience roared and roared for him, and not just for his playing, of course. Let's not kid ourselves: A terrible, tragic thing happened to him, all those years ago, stealing so much of his career. Fleisher will not want tears or pity. But that should not stop us from recognizing a strength in this man that is more than artistic.

Now to a pianist at the beginning of his career: Lang Lang. He is twenty-one years old, and made his Carnegie Hall recital debut shortly after Leon Fleisher returned. Lang is the pianistic phenom of this hour, replacing Evgeny Kissin in this capacity. He is also one of the most hyped musicians in the world. But does this exuberant Chinese pup deserve the hoopla surrounding him? By the evidence of his Carnegie recital, yes. I have criticized him severely in the past, but he seemed to me to reveal a growing musical maturity.

Sure, the fingers are still there, and what stupendous fingers they are. The showmanship is still there too, a showmanship that would make an opera star blush. But Lang evinced a genuine musicianship, particularly in works of Schumann, Haydn, Chopin, and the contemporary Chinese composer Tan Dun. Take the Haydn, which was the Sonata in C major, Hob. XVI:50. Lang did any number of things that grated. But I could not help thinking of Horowitz: You complained about the old Russian, and you did not want others to emulate him (much of the time)—but you stayed glued to him, alternately convinced, entertained, appalled, or awed. Lang's Haydn was exceedingly Romantic, and somewhat mannered, but it was graceful, and musical.

The work by Tan Dun was *Eight Memories in Watercolor*, an Impressionistic suite. Here the young man proved himself to be a deft colorist, someone you would want to experience in Debussy or Ravel. He ended his printed program with Liszt's *Reminiscences of Don Juan*—a piece in which a monster technique can be showed off. Rest assured, it was. The crowd screamed for Lang as for a rock star (or, better, as for Liszt himself). And the phenom had earned the delirium.

Our friend Alicia de Larrocha ended a bit more quietly than Lang Lang began. Now eighty, she has been a giant among us for nearly fifty years. When she gave her farewell to Carnegie Hall last season (in a program with the Tokyo String Quartet), I composed a little rhapsody about her in these pages, which I do not intend to repeat now. Suffice it to say that she is a consummate pianist, who has set a high example for everyone. Her final U.S. appearances, as I remarked at the outset, were with the New York Philharmonic, and she played Haydn's Concerto in D major and Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. These were apt choices: De Larrocha has always been splendid in music of the Classical period, and she has been the world's foremost exponent of the Spanish repertory throughout her career. As to how she played—she is not necessarily wrong to be withdrawing from the stage. But she provided glimpses of her glorious self. Moreover, she has built one of the largest discographies of any pianist: and, God and the record companies willing, we will always have those.



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# Start the revolution without them

*by David Mermelstein*

The saga of Nicholas and Alexandra, Russia's last royal couple, is inherently fecund material for the operatic stage. A Shakespearean quality surrounds their doomed lives, which continue to fascinate us despite the passing of years. In real life, the arc began with a fine romance between two awkward people saddled with dynastic burdens and ended in the worst possible way, with Nicholas, Alexandra, and their five children murdered in the basement of a Siberian "house of special purpose." And yet it has taken until now, eighty-five years after the Ekaterinburg murders, for a composer to set this story to music, to give voice, literally, to the yearning and the agony of these dispossessed royals. So it seems more than a shame that such a task should fall to the inadequate Deborah Drattell, whose previous, dubious credits include the roundly panned *Lilith*, which had its premiere at the New York City Opera in 2001, and *Festival of Regrets*, an aptly named one-act with a libretto by—God, help us!—Wendy Wasserstein. We live in times when compelling opera plots elude able composers and librettists, and the story of Nicholas and Alexandra is a perfect case of the one that got away.

The first work commissioned exclusively by the Los Angeles Opera, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, with music by Drattell and a libretto in English by the *New York Observer* columnist Nicholas von Hoffman (go figure), had its premiere in Los Angeles on September 14. It was supposed to signal to the world that this company, now in its eighteenth year, is forward-looking and that Plácido Domingo, its general director, wants to do more than shepherd bland productions of familiar works. It was, therefore, no accident that this new opera was performed in repertory with a daring and involving production of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, directed by the avant-garde German impresario Achim Freyer. Attempting to broaden definitions of operatic excellence can be laudable, especially in a city like Los Angeles, without a true grand-opera tradition. And pursuing such goals makes even more sense when a company's primary "competition" comes from the Los Angeles Philharmonic, an ensemble often associated with the most progressive tendencies in classical music, and which until this season shared the company's home, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. So it was telling, on opening night, that normally circumspect and forgiving critics, including several who had traveled from overseas, were by intermission already damning—and dooming—*Nicholas and Alexandra*. Even more surprising, those harsh words were echoed by several high-level arts administrators who had flown in for the evening. Yet how could they have kept quiet? Here, before all in attendance, was one of the great train wrecks in recent operatic history, an excruciating and unremitting exercise in musical and literary banality.



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Indeed, *Nicholas and Alexandra* is so very dreadful—let me count the ways—that it's tough to decide in what order to enumerate the failings. The music seems a good place to start. Though Drattell's score is supposedly rooted in the music of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is, in fact, a baffling pastiche. The ecclesiastical homage is there, relayed mainly via static choral writing, but so, too, are interjections of ersatz epic-movie music and strains that recall a Renaissance court band. Drattell's memorable motifs are few and as predictable as they are undistinguished. Drattell could, and certainly should, have written a big, bold score, something worthy of the great passions she was implicitly charting. Instead, she opted for familiar, obvious, and undynamic music. Anyone who has heard her earlier scores will recognize the unmistakable lack of imagination here. Woodwind arpeggios, brass fanfares, harp glissandos, tremulous strings, and drum bursts needn't be clichés, but they are when employed by this composer, who seems to write music in a manner akin to painting by numbers.

In the pit was the estimable seventy-six-year-old Mstislav Rostropovich, making a rare West Coast appearance as a conductor. It would be gratifying to report that, whatever the score's shortcomings, this quintessential Russian musician led the orchestra with a vigor and commitment that belied his doubts about the material. Alas, he didn't. One could argue that the torpor that descended over this production like so much Russian Orthodox incense was in part due to Rostropovich's disengaged ministrations, but no conductor could really have salvaged this score. And the absence of compelling figures on the stage only magnified the music's shortcoming. Perhaps never in history have title characters been as bland as this opera's Nicholas and Alexandra. The thankless, nearly nonexistent role of Alexandra fell to the soprano Nancy Gustafson, who sang well enough, when one could actually distinguish her from the bevy of ladies-in-waiting who sometimes crowded the stage. The baritone Rodney Gilfry fared better as Nicholas. His commitment to the role was evident, and he portrayed the ineffectual monarch faithfully, as the stiff he was in life. But on opening night at least, Gilfry also flubbed some lines. Nicholas and Alexandra's four girls were represented to little effect, with squabbling between Anastasia (Jessica Rivera) and Olga (Margaret Thompson) the most memorable of their contributions. Understandably, Drattell and Hoffman devoted more attention to the grand duchesses' brother, Alexis, the young hemophiliac heir to the throne. It was Alexis's illness that caused Alexandra to rely on Rasputin, the dissolute mystic whose presence at the court helped trigger the Romanov dynasty's collapse. The role fell to Jonathan Price, a treble and currently a ninth grader. It is, of course, bad form to speak ill of child performers, so suffice it to say the screeches and hoots that emanated from this young man made one recall Noel Coward and a certain Mrs. Worthington. But two L.A. Opera stalwarts, Michael Gallup and Suzanna Guzman, created a positive impression as Nicholas's parents, Alexander III and Empress Marie, each limning real characterizations from precious little raw material.

If *Nicholas and Alexandra* was intended to showcase anyone, it was Domingo, in his persona as indefatigable tenor-in-chief. Drattell had intended the role of Nicholas for Domingo, but he clearly found Rasputin more compelling—who wouldn't?—and so the composer retooled things, making Nicholas a baritone and Rasputin a tenor. The arbitrariness of such a change is irrelevant; the point was to get Domingo up on stage for his 120th role. And if the tenor may come to regret shooting for the record books, he did, to his credit, plunge ahead gamely. Or perhaps the man has no shame. Regardless, it was quite something to see Domingo, complete with fake facial hair and a long black wig, dressed in traditional Russian peasant garb. When he pranced around during scenes that were supposed to represent orgies, he looked for all the world like Tevye singing "If I Were a Rich Man." You certainly don't see that everyday. On



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opening night, a suspiciously convenient announcement informed the audience that Domingo was suffering from a vocal ailment. But it was the music, not Domingo, that sounded bad.

It may seem pointless to cavil at the poor direction this opera received. After all, a well-directed staging would hardly have improved matters. And yet why let Ann Bogart (who also directed the premiere of *Lilith* at New York City Opera) off the hook? There was, of course, little she could do about the opera's structure. Drattell and Hoffman open and close the work with the royal family's Siberian imprisonment, making the bulk of the opera a series of flashbacks. And as the end is never in doubt, Bogart couldn't rely on the element of surprise for a bravura finish. But the drabness of the production design and the phlegmatic nature of the action were her fault. Even such potentially exciting moments as the orgies Rasputin organized and the mad monk's storied murder fell flat. The riot scenes on the streets of Petrograd were even worse, simultaneously stiff and inchoate. There were also continuity problems, with characters remaining on stage when they should have been off. And why did Bogart use her SITI dance company to shadow the opera's limited action? Her dancers struck pretentious poses and imparted little. They were, however, the most interesting-looking people on the stage, for Catherine Zuber dressed them in sharp, *Matrix*-like outfits. The rest of the cast, unfortunately, was so blandly attired that it was often tough to distinguish Alexandra from those overbearing ladies-in-waiting. And bland only begins to describe Robert Israel's boring two-dimensional sets, essentially nothing more than a row of French windows offset by pilasters and cornices at the rear of the stage. Maddeningly, as events moved from place to place (or from palace to palace, as it were), the set remained virtually unchanged, the relative height of a crystal chandelier or two notwithstanding. And saturating everything and everyone was Christopher Akerlind's doleful lighting, its creepiness presumably meant to evoke—what?—the fog of war and revolution.

Yet despite these shortcomings of stagecraft, one could still focus one's ire on Hoffman's wretched libretto. The unintentional evocations of Pirandello were, naturally, amusing—"I know who I am!" shouted Nicholas at one point, more as a reminder to his creators than anything else, one assumes, whereas Rasputin's announcing, "Worse is yet to come," must surely have been intended as a warning to the audience. Less funny were the scenes in which portentous exposition, and little physical movement, moved the plot along: "Ah! Food! Work not war. Bring our men home. Stop the war! Bring our men home. Work not war. Peace! Peace! Peace! Ah! Land!" was how Hoffman presented the Russian Revolution, with members of the chorus rigidly intoning the cries in a scene more akin to a 1960s campus protest than a violent urban uprising.

The whole affair lasted nearly three hours, with intermission, but the experience seemed far longer. The longueurs afforded one the opportunity to assess once more the state of new American opera, which is not in great shape despite the periodic pushes by the country's major houses. But Drattell and Hoffman should at least be given credit for attempting to advance the genre in one way. Rather than select as their subject some folk or rural story, or worse yet some pop-culture claptrap, the composer and librettist ventured far afield, to a far-away nation and a long-gone monarchy. It was a brave move, especially given the rich operatic traditions indigenous to Russia. Yet the company failed to capitalize on that ambition, unwilling or unable to enlist the most logical partners in such an ambitious venture, the nearby film studios. Of course, even Hollywood's lavish treatment couldn't erase this opera's fundamental flaws, but it might have obscured some of them. A little pomp and circumstance goes a long way.



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The media

# The story the media missed

*by James Bowman*

Although I have noticed in myself a decline of interest in sporting competition which seems to have proceeded *pari passu* with the decline in my ability to take part in it, I got hooked in October on the World Series—nowadays a misnomer, left over from the Barnum-style puffery of baseball's infancy. But in turning with the renewal of my long-dormant interest to the sports pages of my newspapers, I noticed with a new appreciation that sports writers were only doing in a more concentrated form what all journalists do, all the time. That is, they look at the same few events with an eye for extracting from them the best story they can find. They must take a simple binary system—either you win or you lose—and convert any given result into an epic drama of triumph or tragedy. Even in sports where a draw or tie is possible, one team may be seen as being on the way up for not losing and the other on the way down for not winning.

The drama of the baseball playoff series this year was dominated by the fierce and long-standing rivalry between the Red Sox of Boston and the Yankees of New York—which produced a small brawl in the Yankee bullpen at Fenway Park that has since resulted in the filing of criminal charges—and the "curse" that supposedly lay upon the post-season play of both the Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs. The great thing about the curse story was that it was just as big if the curse were fulfilled or if it were broken. In the event, both the Red Sox and the Cubs remained cursed, which meant that the story could continue to run, but the "ghosts" of past Yankee greats who were said to have appeared in time to see off the hapless Bosox failed their Yankee successors in the Series itself.

This was won by the feisty young Marlins of Florida by four games to two, and their victory seemed to have produced even more and better stories than are usually thrown up by this epic autumnal conflict. The competition for the best stories ended in a toss-up between that of the humbling of the proud and "arrogant" Yankees—which produced anger and disappointment for the famously competitive George Steinbrenner, owner of the Yankees—and that of those lovable, happy-go-lucky, improbable Marlins with their even more improbable seventy-two-year-old manager, Jack McKeon, now the oldest manager ever to win a World Series. Of course, both stories were told in virtually every newspaper, but there were plenty of other stories that yielded up their piquancy to the most ingenious or persistent sports journalists.

In a single day's *New York Times* after the Marlin victory you could read several columns on the event by writers who were both. George Vecsey chose the contrast between the extreme age (in baseball terms) of McKeon and the extreme youth of the Marlins' ace pitcher, Josh Beckett. "They are an odd couple of age and youth: Beckett,



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the swaggering righty from Texas shows little deference to his elders," he wrote, implicitly recognizing the long American tradition of admiration for sauciness in youth and impatience with tradition. McKeon, for his part, was said to be "too young at heart to hang around his porch" in retirement—another recognized characteristic of the American hero.

This was only one among many appreciations of McKeon's youthfulness at heart, which was expressed by his playing the bongo drums among other signs of exuberance. "The man likes to have a good time," wrote Vecsey, "—music, cigars, cocktails, lots of baseball hypotheses in the sultry and smoky night air." Meanwhile, for the titillation of the pious, it was said that McKeon was a devout Roman Catholic, a daily communicant who prayed for victory to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. This, however, was not an aspect to the story which proved to be of much interest to the *Times*. On the page opposite to Vecsey, William C. Rhoden preferred to seek for drama in the juicier and more Yankee-centric question: "Who gets the blame for not winning a World Series?" The Yankees, who, he said, were stretched St. Laurence-like on a painful-sounding "franchise-wide griddle," and spend more than three times what the Marlins do on players' salaries—and, indeed, more than any other team in baseball. This "makes being mowed down by a low-payroll team like the Florida Marlins seem all the more dramatic."

Indeed it did—almost, you could say, tragic, with the Yankees cast in the role of the overweening tragic hero whose pride incurs the *nemesis* of the gods. Meanwhile, baseball purists like Dave Anderson of the *Times* might take the classic, always reliable historical approach of looking back at the previous occasions when the Yankees have lost in Yankee Stadium after returning there down three games to two in the Series—in 1955, 1957, and 1981. Was there a pattern here? The historical method may lack some of the high drama and emotion of the other approaches, but its statistical arabesques have an understated charm all their own. Best of all from the journalist's point of view, examples and precedents may be chosen at liberty from the history of the past several days, weeks, years, or decades. Or all of them together! I particularly enjoyed hearing on All Saints' Day this year, for example, a radio sports announcer noting of the victory the night before for the Washington Capitals in their ice hockey match against the Atlanta Thrashers that it was "ironic that on Hallowe'en the 'Caps' should no longer be *haunted* by their six-game losing streak."

That sort of "irony"—like "drama" and "passion" one of the great journalistic desiderata—may be the tiniest bit stretched by the elegant standards of *The New York Times*, but it is not different in kind from the ironies that even the most exalted political reporters on that paper and elsewhere are always in search of. The power of their political biases to shape a story should not of course be underestimated, but neither should that of their desire to make the story better with ever more striking ironies, particularly if these are ready to hand and familiar enough to the readership that they require no elaborate explanation or justification. As it happened, even as the Marlins were thrashing the Yankees, the big political story—one which an overwhelming preponderance of the journalistic fraternity could tacitly agree upon and draw their ironies from—was being settled on and was also proving to be a story of *hubris* and *nemesis*, of arrogance brought low and humiliated.

Of course it was President Bush who was cast in the role of the New York Yankees. He was supposed to have invaded Iraq "unilaterally" and without a "plan" for the post-war administration of the country, or an "exit strategy" for American troops. Caught by surprise when resistance continued beyond the end of "major combat operations," he and his henchmen could only lamely insist on the rightness of their course, urge patience, and blame the media



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for focusing only on the negative side of the American occupation, the continuing drip-drip-drip of American losses which at times —as when a Chinook helicopter was shot down by Iraqi guerrillas, presumably Ba'athist loyalists, with the loss of sixteen American dead and twenty wounded at the beginning of November—threatened to become a steady flow. For their part, the media were only too happy to be blamed, if only because the charge was seen as lending some credibility to their by-now routine comparisons of American military efforts with the Vietnam War.

As part of The Story, the idea of a repetition of the tragedy of Vietnam was obviously compelling and full of juicy ironies, which is one reason that the press have shown themselves to be always willing to seize on the slightest excuse to bring the comparison up. Yet in this instance, perhaps because "quagmires" had been mentioned already one or two too many times when no quagmires had ensued, this Story of a doubtless "dramatic" re-run of Vietnam had lately taken a back-seat to attempts to make The Story into a scandal—namely the administration's alleged "sexing up" of intelligence data about Weapons of Mass Destruction in order to provide a pretext for war. But in spite of several months of effort, the scandal Story hadn't quite caught on, except among the most ferocious of the President's critics, who were prepared to believe any evil of him and routinely accused him of bad faith, or even criminal malfeasance.

Meanwhile, continuing attacks on and casualties among American troops in Iraq seemed to make the journalistic ground more hospitable for a return to an old favorite Story, one that had been trotted out every time American armed forces had gone into action since at least Grenada. This Story cast the government in the role not of a criminal gang but of a foolish bunch of amateurs blundering into a morass from which they could not extricate themselves. Oddly, however, it was established mostly by indirection. It was hard to find direct statements of the case for the historical parallel, though there were a few, and easy to find articles, a great many articles, arguing that Iraq was *not* another Vietnam. And indeed, the comparison of the die-hard Ba'athist suicide bombers in Iraq with a twenty-year-old, politically united insurgency enjoying widespread popular support and backed by two superpowers was not just wrong but absurd. Yet the effect of the numerous qualified denials was to reinforce the sense that there were, somewhere, lots of people who were saying that Vietnam *was* like Iraq.

Often even those who argued for the validity of the comparison rested their case on the most trivial of similarities. David Maraniss, the biographer of Bill Clinton, has a new book to sell—*They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America October 1967*—so it is perhaps not surprising that in conversation with Keith Olbermann on MSNBC he was able to come up with some similarities: "Eerily, in October of 1967, you had a President who was claiming publicly that he was going to prevail and that the press was getting it wrong, which has a lot of similarities with what's going on today. . . . You're seeing an administration that wants desperately to win the battle of public perceptions. And they were starting to lose it in October of '67, they're starting to lose it again right now as the polls are showing, and so that's why you see this sort of creative Orwellian language, and you also see manipulation of the facts."

Manipulation of the facts! It's shocking, isn't it? At least it is to those, like Mr. Maraniss, who are slaves to the transparent journalistic fiction that the facts speak for themselves. Frank Rich of *The New York Times* found a similarly ingenious way of justifying the comparison to Vietnam by noticing trivial similarities between the White House of George Bush and that of Lyndon Johnson, arguing that "however spurious any analogy between the two wars themselves may be, you can tell that the ad-



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ministration itself now fears that Iraq is becoming a Vietnam by the way it has started to fear TV news." I wonder if there has ever been an administration, at least since it was established in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate that journalists were to assume an "adversarial" posture towards government, which has not feared TV news? Who doesn't fear a powerful enemy, armed with the power to hurt or kill with impunity?

Rich led his article with what he obviously regarded as a piece of evidence for his premise so solid as to need no further explanation. This was Bush's "now legendary" interview with Brit Hume in which he said he didn't pay much attention to the media because "the best way to get the news is from objective sources. . . . And the most objective sources I have are people on my staff who tell me what's happening in the world." Rich's lumbering attempts at wit at the expense of the President and of Fox News, which broadcast the interview, may be passed over in silence, except to say that his own insulation from reality—or "objectivity" as Bush unfortunately put it—was demonstrated by his assumption in what followed that no sane person could possibly believe the truth and accuracy of reports by government officials to be superior to those of the news media, of which he and his newspaper are such ornaments.

For that assumption is part of The Story too: The Story not only of the War, since *all* wars are more or less repeats of the Vietnam War when the media came into its own, but the Master Story of the media itself, which since Vietnam have seen themselves as charged with the high and self-appointed task of speaking truth to power. Rich, of course, got his start as a drama critic, but even so he is no more committed to this particular drama of the plucky reporter confronting an arrogant and self-deluded government than most others. But he might at least have the humility to recognize that any politician who relied on the news media for information more than his own staff would be guilty of gross negligence. What does the president employ a staff of expert advisors for if he is only to submit himself to the instruction of Frank Rich and *The New York Times*? Such a death-wish for his own part would be unfortunate, but on behalf of the people he was elected to serve it would be grounds for impeachment.

Of course it is a truism among journalists of the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate generation that there shall be no limits to the assumption that they must know better how to run the country than the democratically elected leaders and their staffs to whom it is their quasi-constitutional duty to act as correctives—and that this assumption of superior sagacity is founded on nothing but the fact that they occupy regular slots on the editorial or the op-ed pages of major metropolitan newspapers. That's why no one appears to think it in the least untoward that the likes of Maureen Dowd or Richard Cohen—people who have never in their lives done anything but scribble scribble scribble—should routinely accuse their president and his administration of "incompetence." If there is a story to be told of arrogance and overweening pride going before a fall, I think I know a better candidate for its hero than George W. Bush.

But it is not only the putative drama of a powerful man afflicted by both arrogance and ignorance stepping into the same quagmire twice which so appeals to the media. It is not even their sheer hostility to Bush, perhaps, so much as it is simple laziness. Vietnam II may or may not be the compelling story they think it is, but it is certainly a *familiar* story. Its mythic paradigm is subject to as many ingenious reworkings as the outcome of a baseball game, but so intent was the journalistic culture on reworking it that a much better story was being missed—a story potentially more politically damaging than all the nonsense about Vietnam or the absence of allies or of a "plan" or of an "exit strategy." It is that the administration was taking a colossal risk in betting that for the first time ever an Arab country could be made over into a Western-style democracy by the American



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example, and by American military might and money.

*That*, as it happens, was the supposedly missing plan, announced as early as last February in President Bush's speech to the American Enterprise Institute and repeated with a renewed emphasis to the National Endowment for Democracy in November. The media had forgotten about this plan, or supposed it to be mere boilerplate, in their enthusiasm for the bogus story about a planless administration flailing about helplessly in the midst of a chaos it had had no idea it was getting itself into, and it didn't take kindly to being reminded of its negligence. *The New York Times*, for example, showed itself to be the favorite captive of The Story—with which, indeed, it had developed a Stockholm-syndrome of a relationship—when it editorialized that Bush's astonishing call for "global democratic revolution" was all very well but . . .

> Unfortunately, his biggest experiment in democracy promotion has been in Iraq, and he has not been going about it in the most promising ways. As Iraqis are showing, even a terrorized population does not much enjoy foreign invasion and occupation. Nor does it help that Washington is running the show itself, keeping the United Nations and Iraqis mainly on the sidelines. . . . To succeed in this vitally important endeavor, the Bush administration will have to learn to put the same kind of energy and resources into the diplomatic and educational sides of foreign policy as it has devoted to unilateral military action.

Seldom in the history of editorial-writing can a more revolutionary policy initiative have been met by a more crashing banality.

The Story of the administration's incompetence had blinded the *Times*, together with most of the rest of the media, to the real story of its shocking audacity. Bush's plan was breathtakingly bold, and there was every reason to expect that it would fail. This was the rock on which the administrations not of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon but of Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter had foundered, and Bush—whose party had opposed both of them and who had campaigned against a "nation-building" foreign policy in 2000—was preparing to go much further than either of those presidents had done. Not surprisingly, he had looked rather to the example of Ronald Reagan in the Cold War, but no part of Reagan's engagement with Soviet Communism had depended on the transformation of tribal despotisms and third-world oligarchies into Western style democracies.

Was not this hubris? Was not this arrogance? Did it not invite the most terrible nemesis? How trivial in comparison seemed the alleged "arrogance" of the alleged "go-it-alone"—which was actually a go-it-with-only-a-few-dozen-allies—philosophy on which the media harped incessantly. Those who opposed Bush should have been rubbing their hands with glee, or else arguing that the nobility of the attempt was the only thing going for it, while those who supported him might have tried to make the case that, unlikely as success always was, making the attempt was nevertheless the safest option, since any other would have been equally futile and this one at least had the twin merits of demonstrating our good faith to moderate Arabs and concentrating the murderous energies of the terrorists on our troops overseas rather than on our civilians at home.

But for better or for worse, Bush's call to revolutionary action was quite simply The Story not only of his administration but of America's role in the world in the early twenty-first century—and yet the media missed it because it was splashing around in the Vietnam "quagmire." The sports reporters would have done a better job.



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Verse chronicle

# Out on the lawn

*by William Logan*

I should have reviewed Billy Collins's *Nine Horses* months ago, but I couldn't stand the excitement.[1] Collins is that rarity among American poets, one with popular appeal, easy to read as a billboard, genial as a Sunday golfer, and not so awful you want to cut your throat after reading him. Many readers complain that poetry is difficult to understand, the way they grumble when an opera is sung in Italian or resent a Czech film with subtitles. Art isn't supposed to be such hard work, is it? Billy Collins writes poetry for those people, and they appreciate it.

Collins specializes in goofy, slightly offbeat subjects. If you want a poem about mice who play with matches, or about that song repeating uncontrollably in your head, or about feeling sorry for Whistler's mother, he's your man. *Angst* is not a word he's learned, or *Weltschmerz* (he may have learned *Schadenfreude*, but he's forgotten it). What he loves is the cheesy sentiment of the everyday: "I peered in at the lobsters// lying on the bottom of an illuminated/ tank which was filled to the brim/ with their copious tears." *To the brim*! Or worse, if anything could be worse than weeping lobsters, he loves everything—he's got a heart big as all outdoors:

> This morning as I walked along the lakeshore,
> I fell in love with a wren
> and later in the day with a mouse
> the cat had dropped under the dining room
> table.
>
> In the shadows of an autumn evening,
> I fell for a seamstress
> still at her machine in the tailor's window,
> and later for a bowl of broth,
> steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

You want to stop him before he becomes a public hazard. It's tough to read a poet who has overdosed on some mood elevator, who is every goddamned minute "cockeyed with gratitude."

Collins has been called a philistine, but you can read a lot of contemporary poetry without coming across references to William Carlos Williams, Coventry Patmore, Walter Pater, or *Clarissa*. He's something worse, a poet who doesn't respect his art enough to take it seriously. Once or twice an image makes you stop: a dead groundhog, say, like "a small Roman citizen,/ with his prosperous belly,// his faint smile,/ and his one stiff forearm raised/ as if he were still alive, still hailing Caesar." Then it's back to a kind of NPR commentary on contemporary mores, like the use of trompe l'oeil in your kitchen. Collins makes cheap art for the masses, like posters of a Monet. Once you've seen a real Monet, posters can't compare.

The best poem here is about the afterlife. The skies there are sulphurous, the dead

1 *Nine Horses*, by Billy Collins; Random House, 123 pages, $21.95; $12.95 (paper).



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souls crowded into boats, bent over writing tablets, under the gaze of hellish boatmen. What are the dead working on? Poetry assignments.

> how could anyone have guessed
>
> that as soon as we arrived
> we would be asked to describe this place
> and to include as much detail as possible—
> not just the water, he insists,
>
> rather the oily, fathomless, rat-happy water,
> not simply the shackles, but the rusty,
> iron, ankle-shredding shackles—
> and that our next assignment would be
>
> to jot down, off the tops of our heads,
> our thoughts and feelings about being dead.

In Collins's last book, the best poem was also about a poetry assignment—why can he be hilarious about them and merely droll about everything else?

Collins never gets worked up over things—even faced with death, he makes winsome jokes, the kind morticians tell at undertaking conventions. He's the Caspar Milquetoast of contemporary poetry, never a word used in earnest, never a memorable phrase. The moral revelation toward which his poems saunter always seems to be "See? I'm human too." I read this as not joy but contempt. If such poems look embarrassing now, what are they going to look like in twenty years?

Yet readers adore Billy Collins, and it feels almost un-American not to like him. Try to explain to his readers what "The Steeple-Jack" or "The River Merchant's Wife" or "The Snow Man" is up to, and they'll look at you as if you'd asked them to hand-pump a ship through the locks of the Panama Canal. Most contemporary poetry isn't any more difficult to understand than Collins—it's written in prose, good oaken American prose, and then chopped into lines. Perhaps it's self-absorbed, downbeat, even self-pitying, where Collins every morning throws open the drapes to greet the dawn, taking a deep breath of good suburban air. (You can imagine him hosting a health and fitness show.) If once in a coon's age there's a dark cloud on the horizon, if he gets a trifle gloomy or down in the mouth then, well, he's rueful with a *twinkle*, damn it, the way a poet ought to be.

Rosanna Warren has a warm, classical sensibility (if she has a chip on her shoulder, it's a chip of Greek marble), and some of her poems are an atlas of Greek temples, a phone book of Greek gods. Though *Departure* is her fourth book, her imagination is not highly distinctive—she does what a lot of other poets do, often a little better, sometimes a little worse.[2] There's a poem contemplating a Hellenistic head, poems about her dying mother, poems about gardening or a story by Colette or a landscape seen from a plane, even a poem that almost makes Boston a classical ruin (in a book that invokes the *Iliad*, it's amusing to come across the lines "By beer bottles, over smeared/ Trojans").

Warren has the disadvantage of being the daughter of two once well-known writers—when she mentions her father, it's hard not to think, "But that's Robert Penn Warren." When her mother is ill, you're tempted to cry, "But of course. Eleanor Clark." Warren never drops names, but then she doesn't have to. The children of writers must be aware that in their work biography intrudes more dramatically than for poets whose parents are anonymous.

The poems about her mother's last years ought to be among the most appealing; yet, however carefully coddled, however dryly observed, they seem merely dutiful. Not dutiful toward her mother—dutiful toward poetry.

> Your purpled, parchment forearm
> lodges an IV needle and valve;
> your chest sprouts EKG wires;
> your counts and pulses swarm

2 *Departure*, by Rosanna Warren; Norton, 118 pages, $22.95.



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in tendrils over your head
on a gemmed screen: oxygen,
heart rate, lung power, temp
root you to the bed—

Magna Mater, querulous, frail,
turned numerological vine . . .

With that sudden nod toward grandiloquence, all the heart seeps out of the poem. The description is good as such descriptions are, but with nothing stirring in the phrases—it's life worked up into art; yet, while the strangeness of life has gone, the intensity of art has not arrived.

The most curious work here is a series of translations from the notebooks of a young French poet, Anne Verveine, who disappeared while hitchhiking in Uzbekistan. The poems themselves are stale and unprofitable—they seem, like so many translations, just the translator wearing a different suit of clothes. At times the Frenchwoman sounds more like Warren than Warren. This would be unremarkable, if Verveine were not completely imaginary. Having admitted as much in the notes, Warren oddly tricks her out with a dry biography ("She lived obscurely in Paris, avoiding literary society and working as a typographer") and then smartly packs her off to her death.

It's hard to know what to make of this convoluted business. W. D. Snodgrass published a book of poems under the pseudonym S. S. Gardons (a cheerful anagram), making his alter ego a gas-station attendant. The British poet Christopher Reid, twenty years ago, published translations of an imaginary Eastern European poet named Katerina Brac—some readers were convinced she was real. In recent decades, there have been examples enough of literary imposture, authors winning awards by impersonating an Australian aborigine or a Jew who survived the Holocaust. Warren's "translations" give no special insight into Paris or the lives of young women. It's strange to have gone to so much trouble.

In her own poems, Warren uses all the right devices—similes, metaphors, allusions, lists—in a slightly mechanical way. Her favorite method of construction is a violent turn or peripeteia, but such swervings often seem nervousness, not nerve. What salvages this book of intelligent, well-meaning poems, most of them conventional as cottage cheese, are one or two that rise from some dark source even the poet seems unsure about:

For six days, full-throated, they praised
the light with speckled tongues and blare
  of silence by the porch stair:
honor guard with blazons and trumpets raised
still heralding the steps of those
  who have not for years walked here
  but who once, pausing, chose

this slope for a throng of lilies:
and hacked with mattock, pitching stones
  and clods aside to tamp dense
clumps of bog-soil for new roots to seize.
So lilies tongued the brassy air.

This has the intensity missing elsewhere—the densities required by rhyme seem partly responsible. Whatever ritual the poet incanted, however she prepared for description so coolly rehearsed and a transcendence effortlessly reached some lines later, she ought to do it again and again.

Howard Nemerov, who died in 1991 at the age of seventy-one, wrote dry philosophical poetry with an air of maundering discontent and surly introspection (you can almost smell the martinis being drunk). Though his *Collected Poems* (1977) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, he never enjoyed a commanding critical reputation—sometimes as the honors pile up a poet's reputation withers. Nemerov is doomed to be remembered for the accident of birth that made him the older brother of the photographer Diane Arbus.

*The Selected Poems of Howard Nemerov*[3] is

3 *The Selected Poems of Howard Nemerov*, by Howard Nemerov, edited by Daniel Anderson; Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 154 pages, $24.95; $16.95 (paper).



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an honorable attempt to make a case for a *connoisseur of margins and glooms, of* grand illusions and middle-class mortgages. Nemerov came to poetry almost fully formed, for a long while writing pentameter so stiff it seemed to be wearing a neck brace:

> The dry husk of an eaten heart which brings
> Nothing to offer up, no sacrifice
> Acceptable but the canceled-out desires
> And satisfactions of another year's
> Abscess, whose zero in His winter's mercy
> Still hides the undecipherable seed.

Abstractions were Nemerov's best friends (and therefore worst enemies)—he could cram so many into a poem, they looked like frat boys stuffed in a phone booth. The language here has congealed into a diction and pace all too familiar in the thirties and forties (Yeats was responsible, but what for him was a medium of banker's marble was linoleum for anyone else). Yet the lines above were published not in the forties, but in 1960, just after Lowell's *Life Studies* had made that style out of date as a velocipede.

Though Nemerov's poems grew more colloquial as he aged, he was never comfortable with what the age demanded (he roared against it like the last tyrannosaur), withdrawing into rote performance—like a singer forever giving his farewell concert, Nemerov perfected the dying fall. Misanthropes are agreeable enough, if you share their misanthropy (no one has ever founded a Misanthropes' Club, because they'd murder each other trying to write bylaws). Nemerov's poems suffered not because they were forbiddingly deep or abstruse, but because he couldn't end them without buttonholing the reader with stilted, crack-jawed observations:

> To translate the revolving of the world
> About itself, the spinning ambit of the seasons
> In the simple if adamant equation of time
> Around the analemma of the sun.

Was *analemma* really the best word available? A poet who wants above all to be taken seriously usually ends by pricing himself out of business.

Though Nemerov managed to temper his bad habits (the passive constructions, the cholesterol of "to be" verbs, the curiously submissive speakers), he couldn't avoid a moral coldness. Writing sourly of Christmas, he refers to the "alien priest/ Who drenches his white robes in gasoline/ And blazes merrily in the snowy East." The image is appalling—irony has crossed into hatred. (If this is Vietnam, why the snow?) Two decades later, the poet writes about the Challenger disaster: "The nation rises again/ Reborn of grief and ready to seek the stars;/ Remembering the shuttle, forgetting the loom." To end a poem of mourning with dreadful puns reveals a tone deafness that would have crippled even a great poet.

The pleasures of reading Nemerov are fugitive and coarse (even in his grander poems something is withheld): a poet of bilious emotion and narrow technique is better off writing epigrams, where dyspepsia is a recommendation, even an advantage.

> Their marriage is a good one. In our eyes
> What makes a marriage *good*? Well, that the
> tether
> Fray but not break, and that they stay together.
> One should be watching while the other dies.

The fondness here has been cloaked, but then misanthropes are often misanthropic because of a sentimental streak.

A few war poems not included here, all published forty years after VJ Day, suggest the poet he might have become, had he been willing to write more about the combat missions he flew in World War II. As belatedly as Anthony Hecht, he could have been an exception in a war where the best verse was written by men (Randall Jarrell, Richard Eberhart, Henry Reed) who did not see combat. Nemerov was one of the most intelligent poets of his generation; yet, for all the austere and noble lines, his high-sounding phrases (and occasional low jokes), the verse is mostly dead to its language, as strewn with salt as the ruins of Carthage.



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Sometimes a poet of whom the world has taken only minor notice begins to write more provocatively in middle age, as if it took decades to rub away the burrs of apprenticeship. (What remains is a glimmer of youth irretrievably lost, rather than the glare of youthful hubris.) Sherod Santos, a mild-mannered poet now in his mid-fifties, at first seems a bard of the suburbs, a poet of domestic certitudes and muted despairs (few Americans admit to being middle-aged; fewer confess to living in the suburbs—our prejudices are shallow as the Great Salt Lake). In *The Perishing*,[4] his idea of a wild time is waking to what sounds like a rain shower, but turns out to be a neighbor's sprinkler:

> Across the street, our recently widowed
> neighbor
> Had left her garden sprinkler on, its standing
> water
> Here and there welling up over the concrete
> curb
> In loose, collected rivulets of wet, a moon-lit
> runoff
> Less like spilled water than the dispossessing
> ghost
> Of water sluicing down the gutters and away.

There's nothing wrong with this, and nothing very right, either—it's an instant well-described, touched with the music of sadness and a twitch of regret, the sort of thing John Updike might have done a thousand times in a novel. Santos loves such moments, which hover between sentiment and sententiousness. After a dozen of them you want to put your hand into a lawnmower blade.

Not all Santos's suburban poems are dull as a sack of mulch, hedging as hedge-clippers; but they love garden-variety transcendence almost as much as they'd love, say, Irish peat moss. Santos's life doesn't lend itself to drama (most lives don't—they'd sell themselves to drama for pocket change). There are love poems of a dispiriting sort, homages to his wife's naked body, things a mature poet can write almost without thinking, but with what Henry James called "finish." Such poems live the way cakes do behind the plate-glass window of a bakery—they live in plaster.

Many poets now write of domestic routines, which may take the adage *Write what you know* to the point of fallacy, or suicide. In the odd limbo of the suburbs, that zone once merely the spillage of the city into country, now a center of its own, what's lacking is intensity (many suburban poems seem muffled or padded, as if they spent their afternoons training attack dogs). I can imagine the poems Larkin would have written, had he lived in Levittown—they'd have been just as morose as those he wrote in Hull. Americans seem unable to catch the rage at the heart of Larkin's verse. Perhaps as a country we're not repressed enough.

You can go a long way in Santos to find the mildest fracture in his suburban pastoral, but then he's another poet altogether. When he was thirteen, a woman entered his bedroom during a party and, opening her blouse, drew his hand first across her breast, then across her mastectomy scar. Instead of becoming a paean to an older woman's beauty and need (the seduction that follows seems almost incestuous), the poem questions all the love he has known since. Santos has seen certain abysses and not drawn back from them.

Most of the poet's past work has been easy-going as conversation, colloquial as a coat of paint, but the new poems sometimes require a different register:

> When my father broke his family's counsel
> And re-upped for the airlift into Germany,
> He stormed the black capital like Ecgtheow's
> son,
> His tonnage downgraded to anthracite
> From Amatol and TNT, such payloads
> As custom still meted out to a city Grendeled
> In the underworld of incendiary smoke.

This growls out Germanic myths like an

4 *The Perishing*, by Sherod Santos; Norton, 84 pages, $21.95.



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Anglo-Saxon scop, the savage names—Amatol and TNT—sounding like Beowulf's companions-in-arms. In half a dozen poems, Santos portrays a world the suburbs try to forget—the world where people starve, or are beaten and tortured.

> One evening, for the benefit
> Of three mothers who'd been summoned
> To watch through the open window
> Of a barber shop, a badly beaten
> *Milicias* youth was carried inside, stripped
> Of his clothes, and bound spread-eagle
> To a tabletop. They'd thought, at first,
> He might be the one-armed riverman's son,
> The one who trapped chameleons
> He'd then sell for coins in the village square.

That note of irrelevance, even of mild comedy, rescues what might remain of the human. Santos does not yet have Anthony Hecht's brutality or grace; but, in a time when poems are more politicized than political, he accepts the homeliness of evil. If he sometimes makes his points too plainly (there's an egregiously silly poem about dictators), if he doesn't quite know how to finish what he's started, beneath the surface of his tranquil suburban tracts something brutish has begun to stir.

Carolyn Forché writes hushed, whispery, numinous lines, the kind that emerge from a blank page held over a candle flame. *Blue Hour*[5] is troubled, haunting, stained with the salts of European poetry (Forché loves Desnos, Char, Jabès), and it's possible to let her poems mesmerize you for a time.

> In the blue silo of dawn, in earth-smoke and
> birch copse,
> where the river of hands meets the Elbe.
>
> In the peace of your sleeping face, *Mein*
> *Liebchen.*
>
> We have our veiled memory of running from
> police
> dogs through a blossoming orchard, and
> another
> Of not escaping them. That was—ago—(a
> lifetime),
> but now you are invisible in my arms.

Such death-hunted lines pay homage to half a century of poetry wounded into speech by Fascists, Nazis, Communists, and many a murderous government since. That poetry is inadequate to such politics is a commonplace: the tormented phrases of Paul Celan were little better than a suicide note. That does not make the attempt to speak against injustice less noble (however ignoble most poems about politics are). Forché once wrote poems passionate with righteous (and self-righteous) anger; but, in her last book, *The Angel of History* (1994), she lost her taste for lyric or narrative and took up a style of tesserae and ostraka, Eliot's "fragments I have shored against my ruins."

*The Angel of History* was an original work, pretentious and disturbing, opportunistic, vampirish, soiled in its own sorrows and everyone else's. Forché's new poems, if poems they are, continue this disjointed, fragmented manner in ways sometimes alarming. *Blue Hour* consists of ten short poems and an immensely long one, less a poem than a shopping list of images. Her shorter pieces establish the atmosphere of, the sense of foreboding in, secrets kept and pain suffered. Forché wants to do something different from her contemporaries, without sacrificing the beauty of lyric. (The death of the lyric is announced as often as the death of the novel, the press release usually read out by someone who wouldn't know a lyric if it ate him.) What this means in practice are vague and portentous lines by the barrelful, lines whose gestures toward meaning are rhetorical nudges. When the poet writes, "An abandoned house, after all, will soon give itself back, and its walls become as unreadable as symbols on silk," something beautiful has been said, but said in half-thoughts.

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5 *Blue Hour*, by Carolyn Forché; HarperCollins, 75 pages, $24.95.



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That such partial, undecoded meanings are in essence religious is nowhere clearer than in the forty-page poem that closes the book. The notes inform us that it is based on gnostic abecedarian hymns that "date from the third century A.D." These thousand lines are meant to render the last images passing through the mind of someone dying—that's the dust jacket's opinion (how it can tell, I'm not sure).

> bone child in the palm a bird in the heart
> bone-clicking applause of the winter trees
> bones of the unknown
> bones smoothed by water
> book of smoke, black soup
> born with a map of calamity in her palm

A stanza of this is unsettling, a page tiresome, forty pages nearly unbearable agony. I don't know if thoughts like these will pass through my mind as I die (though I hope not), but I'm sure they won't pass through alphabetically. (I'll probably be thinking of the unpaid gas bill and the cock I owe Asclepius.) I read every line, as a reviewer is obliged to do, and I must report that I shouted with delight when I got past the letter *a*. Whatever the gnostics saw in this form, it must have been one of the reasons they died out.

Religions love to call tedium ritual, and I see advantages to using repetition to numb the chanter to the torments of his day. It's hard to know what to make of such lines as a poem—you get snapshots of horror, fresh as the daily news; lines that hint at secrets, searches, refugees; and images that might have come from Freud's secret dreams. It's as if the poet had for a decade stored up surplus images in a carton and one night dumped them out and arranged them in alphabetical order. The problem with these contextless phrases is not that they don't let tragedy in, but that they don't keep comedy out. This poem is the graveyard where unused lines go to die.

I can't resist quoting some of the blurbs, which take a kinder view: "an uncanny mixture of peace, beauty, and cruelty. If you ask, 'Which country is it?' the answer is, 'This country called earth'"; "a masterwork for the twenty-first century"; "wise beyond any possible taint of a false or assumed innocence"; "Carolyn Forché, my hero." Even in this country called blurbdom, these have drunk too long at the bar. Forché wants to write a wisdom book, haunted by all the misery that is the world. I had complaints about her early poems, chiefly that they were sentimental, but I have more complaints about poems that aren't poems, just do-it-yourself kits of New Age gnosticism, some assembly required, batteries not included.

James Fenton, the best poet of his generation in Britain, is still too little known in our country. He has spent long periods of his life not writing poetry at all, having been, at various times, a foreign correspondent in Europe and on the Pacific rim, a London theater critic, an explorer in Borneo, and the Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He grew rich, it is said, writing the lyrics for *Les Misérables,* though his songs were never used (this suggests the importance in life of having a good agent). If Fenton wrote a novel on the back of cereal cartons, or made a model of St. Paul's from matchbooks, the results would be worth seeing; but, if a man does some work brilliantly and the rest half-heartedly (his Oxford lectures on poetry, for instance), shouldn't he do only what he does well? The same question hovered over the late career of a greater poet, T. S. Eliot.

*The Love Bomb*[6] consists of two libretti and an oratorio, all commissioned, labored and fretted over, but only the last performed. Fenton has a witty introduction lamenting the librettist's life ("Nobody would believe that the dog ate my homework. But that the dog ate my opera house —*twice*—might well be believed"). *The Love Bomb* starts with a terrible handicap: to

6 *The Love Bomb, and Other Musical Pieces*, by James Fenton; Faber and Faber, 184 pages, $16.00 (paper).



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enjoy a libretto properly, the reader ought to have a CD of the music—or, better, at an appointed hour a tenor, a soprano, and a man with a boom box should show up on your doorstep. On the bare page, words are stripped of much that would have made them interesting on stage—costume and voice, gesture, the emotive color of music, all the things that clothe the naked word. Without them the emperor is often, well, naked.

In "The Love Bomb," a young man tries to rescue his former girlfriend from a religious cult. The cult plots to recruit him, as well as—here's the twist—his boyfriend. This began in a reading of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, and soon enough you wish it had stayed there. Even the most awful opera plot can be rescued by words and music, but the words here aren't doing a very good job:

> Don't go down the towpath, Anna.
> Don't go along the canal.
> That's where all the accidents happen.
> *Treat me to an accident. Be my pal.*

> 'Cos one door opens on love
> And one door opens on death.
> And one door opens on the lift shaft.
> Turn the handle. Hold your breath.

The Audenesque strain isn't nearly strong enough. Where Auden was clever, Fenton is callow and cliché-ridden—it would be hard to sit through a performance without snickering. The first act is much worse than the two that follow; yet the whole is leaden, not because it has ideas (as Auden's work so often did), but because it lacks them. Everything about colloquial language that Fenton has turned to advantage in his poetry has turned against him here.

The second libretto tries to make an opera from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories,* the children's book by Salman Rushdie. A storyteller loses his wife and, with her, his ability to tell tales—without his stories, he may soon lose his tongue. His son must journey to the Sea of Stories to set things right. (Rushdie worked some typically inventive if irritating turns on eastern folk tales). It's hard to imagine this as opera, not just because the tale has such sentimental notions of story-telling, but because it's a fantastic childlike adventure with Arabian Nights effects, including water genies and floating gardeners and talking hoopoes, as well as a kidnapped princess about to be sacrificed by the Prince of Darkness and Arch-Enemy of All Stories.

The poetry is no better than before (it's a pity Fenton didn't take more delight in names like Snooty Buttoo, Prince Bolo, and the Shah of Blah). There's a moment, late in this silly business, when W. S. Gilbert seems to come to the rescue. It's only one song, and wouldn't seem much if quoted; but, after eighty or so pages of chewing shoe-leather, it tastes like caviar. You realize then that Gilbert took sillier ideas and made genius of them.

About the best that can be said for Fenton's oratorio, "The Fall of Jerusalem," is that it contains some passable light verse and some awful free verse: "God it was who gave us our minds,/ Minds that scorn death,/ Scorn to live in slavery/ Under a Roman yoke." Fenton was once able to handle both with dexterity and wit—he has written some of the most sensitive war poems of the last half century. In this long and wearying book I felt his talent engaged by a single couplet, "Something better than those nefarious gymnastics/ With coked-up blokes in various elastics." Cole Porter and W. S. Gilbert and even Auden might have smiled over such lines, but there's nothing else like them. Readers who want to know what this remarkable poet can do should read his early collection of poems, *Children in Exile*; his book of theater criticism, *You Were Marvellous*; his essays on art, *Leonardo's Nephew*; or his book of reportage, *All the Wrong Places*—and then send Fenton a postcard pleading with him to get back to work.



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Books

# John Clare: freedom & enclosure

*by Paul Dean*

The life span of John Clare (1793–1864) runs from Pitt to Palmerston, Washington to Lincoln, Blake and Burns to Trollope and Tennyson; yet the essential features of his world were contained within a few square miles clustered around his birthplace, Helpston, Northamptonshire, in the east of England, a village containing about sixty families. Clare never went as far east as Cambridge or further north than Boston, Lincolnshire, the latter affording him his one view of the sea; he became nervous if he moved more than two or three miles away from Helpston. His four trips to London might as well have been visits to Mars, and he was regarded by the inhabitants of the city much as a Martian might have been. He amassed a great quantity of country lore and was skilled in several trades, he could boast a library of four hundred books and was a ruggedly independent critic of what he read, he had several volumes of published poetry to his credit, but his lifelong lack of Standard English spelling, grammar, and punctuation brought condescension and emendation down on his head.

Only in the twentieth century, thanks to the labors of a succession of editors, preeminently David Powell and Eric Robinson, was his voice heard in its native accents. Now, with the appearance of a judicious, modern-spelling selection of his poems and a magnificent new biography, both by Jonathan Bate,[1] we can appreciate the fullness of his achievement and the odds against which it was won.

On the evening of the day Clare was born, Charlotte Corday assassinated Marat in his bath. Bate calls him "a war baby," growing up in revolutionary times, with which he was out of sympathy both by temperament and environment. A non-partisan conservative and a conservationist, he always referred to the Civil War as "the rebellion of Oliver Cromwell" and, though himself no churchgoer, likened the "enthusiastic ravings" of Methodists or Calvinists to "the bellowings of Bedlam." (He was briefly a Primitive Methodist in the early 1820s, but the attraction waned.) By an accident of geography, Helpston and its surroundings were untypical of rural England in several ways. They were not the completely isolated fastness portrayed by early writers on Clare; he was within reach of Market Deeping, which had a theater and postal links to London, and of Stamford, which had a thriving cultural life and two (later three) newspapers. Weekly markets provided an opportunity to exchange news.

Helpston, then, was no backwater. The respect in which it was old-fashioned was its rural economy. Bate explains:

> An unusually high proportion of Helpston vil-

1 *"I Am": The Selected Poetry of John Clare*, edited by Jonathan Bate; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 310 pages, $14 (paper). *John Clare: A Biography*, by Jonathan Bate; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 637 pages, $35.



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> lagers held common rights. An unusually large area of the parish consisted of heathland and "wastes" from which the commoners could gather fuel. And the open fields survived until an unusually late date [the last of all until 1898].

By the time of the passing of the Enclosure Act for Helpston and district in 1809, Clare was sixteen. All his formative years had been spent in an open world of individually owned strips of land, dispersed around three major fields—Lolham Bridge, Heath, and Woodcroft—bounded by Royce Wood and Oxey Wood, with the common grazing land of Emmonsales Heath beyond. The reader of Clare quickly becomes acquainted with these names, and with others which held talismanic significance for him, such as Langley Bush and Swordy Well. These were the scenes of what he recalled as an idyllic childhood of freedom, roaming among a landscape whose every contour he knew and loved, "the sweet retreat of twenty lingering years."

The effects of enclosure upon this old world, which had lasted since the Middle Ages in a village which still kept the pre-Reformation festive year, were devastating. All sense of community, of intimacy between people and land, was roughly cast aside as roads were built, fields were parcelled out into rectangles, fences were erected, trees felled, and streams diverted. The common land passed into the hands of private owners, whose message to the villagers was stark and simple: "No Trespassing." In one of his greatest poems, "Remembrances," Clare turns on this process with cold fury:

> Enclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing
> remain,
> It levelled every bush and tree and levelled
> every hill
> And hung the moles for traitors—
> though the brook is running still,
> It runs a naked stream, cold and chill.

Bate cites a suggestive essay by John Barrell on the sense of place in Clare, the tension between the circular rhythms of the parish and the linear restrictions imposed by Enclosure. That is the key to Clare's psychology, to his writing, his life, and his eventual mental collapse. He is a sufferer from spiritual claustrophobia. The cramped cottage in which he was born and grew up did not bother him; the restrictions on his wanderings over heath and common were an agony.

Clare lost his twin sister before they were a month old. This, Bate suggests, was also decisive in shaping his obsession with the lost innocence of childhood. In a poem written when he was fifty-five, he enumerates the beloved memories once more, then writes, "All forget us before we are men." It is our present selves who are forgotten by our past, not the other way round. To be an adult is to be an exile. What saves this from sentimentality is the precision of Clare's observations: he calls the roll of pellitory (a nettle-like plant), henbane, mallows, princess-feather tree, and green-linnet's nest, shaming our ignorance. Significantly, Clare could make nothing of the Linnaean taxonomy of plants, with its Latin names and tidy categories, which, in Bate's words, "did not answer to his perception of the wild flowers peculiar to his own neighborhood," about which he could have taught Linnaeus a thing or two. He was similarly impatient with the abstractions of English grammar; he wrote as he spoke, picking up style from his reading, and knew he was perfectly intelligible. Earlier editors stigmatized as "incorrect" what were in fact dialect vocabulary and usages. The difficulty of these can be overplayed; the glossary in Bate's selection of poems occupies only two and a half pages, and one quickly becomes accustomed to Clare's favorite words.

Clare's father, Parker Clare, was a casual laborer, and the boy's schooling was casual too, fitted in when he was not required for agricultural work. At his second school he met Mary Joyce, who became a symbol of idealized love for him. Throughout his life Clare was obsessed with Mary, devoting dozens of poems to her, coming to believe



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she was his wife, and refusing to accept that she had died, unmarried, in 1838 at the age of forty-one. When his desultory formal education ended, Clare drifted through a succession of jobs, ploughing, working in the pub next door to his house, keeping horses, gardening, and working on the nearby Burghley estate, owned by the Marquess of Exeter. For a time he served in the militia, but never saw active service. Eventually, aged twenty-five, he left Helpston and worked as a lime-burner in the Stamford area, where he met Martha Turner, who became his wife.

So far his story could be that of thousands of early nineteenth-century working men. What sets Clare apart is his literary self-education. Prose counted for little in this; most of the great English novels simply passed him by. The ballads of oral tradition such as his father and the neighbors sang, the literary ballads of Burns, the meditative poetry of Cowper, Thomson's *The Seasons*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* were his early loves. He saved money to buy books, which he hid from his parents in a locked chest. The works just mentioned transmitted a mixed influence, part Latinate elegance and part plain, homely diction; Clare eventually shed the former and stuck to the English he knew best. Like many another teenager he scribbled poems in his spare time, writing with a pencil on the crown of his hat in the fields; pretending they were the works of others, he tried them out on his parents, who commented, "Aye, boy, if you could write so, you would do." It was a particular pleasure to him that Parker Clare lived to see his son's work in print.

The turning-point in his fortunes came through the Stamford bookseller Edward Drury. "Peasant poetry" was fashionable; the laborer Robert Bloomfield had made a sensation with *The Farmer's Boy* (1800). Clare spent a week's wages on a handsome blank-paper book and began copying his poems into it. With some local encouragement he issued a proposal to print his poems by subscription, but this fell through. Then Drury took up Clare's cause and showed some poems to his cousin, John Taylor of Taylor and Hessey in London, the publishers of Keats's *Endymion*. Taylor was enthusiastic, and *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* appeared in 1820, reprinting three times within the year.

There has been much controversy about Taylor's role. Eric Robinson maintains that he distorted Clare's work by his editorial interventions, alterations, and corrections, in effect destroying its authenticity to make it conform with metropolitan notions of polite literature and stylistic decorum. Building upon the ground-breaking work of Zachary Leader in *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford, 1996), Bate largely acquits Taylor of these charges, showing that Clare frequently solicited such help and was grateful for it, recognizing that in publishing his poetry he had to have an eye to attracting readers and that some modifications of his own usage would be necessary. Taylor was flexible; Bate quotes his tribute that Clare spoke "the unwritten language of England" and his comment in a letter, "Your Education has better fitted you for a Poet than all School Learning in the World was able to do."

Not that all Taylor's work was helpful, or that Clare was necessarily better off for being brought before the world. He was caught between conflicting expectations; his local patrons were aristocrats who expected to censor the poems for radical phrases and looked down their noses at publishers as mere tradesmen, whereas Taylor was a middle-class Nonconformist with a grasp of the practical realities of marketing at a time when the public appetite for poetry was beginning to wane. He realized that Clare's rustic forthrightness and clumsiness were essential parts of his appeal, but to make him commercially profitable he had to be "civilized" to some extent. Their relationship was stormy. There were incessant squabbles over advance payments and royalties, although, as Bate points out, "The accounts were a mess not because Taylor was trying to dupe Clare but because all Taylor and Hessey's finances



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were a mess." The delay between volumes, however, grew longer; Clare's second collection, *The Village Minstrel*, appeared in 1821, a year after his first, but then his best known book, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, had to wait until 1827, its text being heavily edited by Taylor. It makes a striking contrast with the poems of the same name by the Elizabethan Edmund Spenser, whose pastoral conceits are replaced by examples of what Bate neatly terms "the art of noticing." In "March," for instance:

> While, far above, the solitary crane
> Swings lonely to unfrozen dykes again,
> Cranking a jarring melancholy cry
> Through the wild journey of the cheerless sky.

The tinny sound-effects, brittle in the cold, and the rhythmic mimicry of the slow flapping of the bird's wings, are impeccably done.

Clare visited London four times in the 1820s, meeting Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey. He was particularly appreciative of the quality of their talk, so different from what he was accustomed to or, indeed, from what he could produce himself, with his unpolished manner and lack of classically trained fluency. He was not dazzled, however, shrewdly noting how Coleridge's words "hung in their places at a quiet pace from a drawl in good set marching order" as if rehearsed, and how the neurotic Hazlitt entered a room "with his eyes in his hands as if it were throwing under gazes round at every corner." Although he never met Keats, he responded to his work with shrewd appreciation, while dubious about his "constant allusion or illusion to the Grecian Mythology" and his lack of firsthand acquaintance with the natural world. (Conversely, Taylor reported Keats's feeling that Clare's "Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment.") In 1824 Clare happened upon the funeral procession of Byron, and was impressed by the contrast between the detachment of "the quality" watching from adjacent houses, and the sorrow of the common people in the crowd: "They are the veins and arteries that feed and quicken the heart of living fame." Later, in his madness, he would identify himself with Byron. There are more similarities than might at first appear, as Bate points out: the hatred of cant, the depressive streak, the promiscuity, the taste for satire, all link the lord and the laborer.

Bate's account of Clare's mental decline is one of the finest achievements in his biography. To simplify a complex sequence of events: Clare first experienced severe depression in the mid-1820s and the early 1830s, which was not helped by his having moved from Helpston to Northborough, a distance of only a few miles which nonetheless made him feel bereft. The loss is expressed with agonizing vividness in "On Leaving the Cottage of my Birth":

> I miss the heath, its yellow furze,
> Molehills and rabbit tracks that lead
> Through besom-ling and teasel burrs
> That spread a wilderness indeed,
> The woodland oaks and all below
> That their white-powdered branches shield,
> The mossy paths—the very crow
> Croaked music in my native field.

In 1837, increasingly severe spells of depression and aberrant behavior led to Clare's confinement in High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest, north east of London, where he remained for four years under the liberal regime of Matthew Allen. Jane Carlyle, after a visit, tartly described the place as one "to which any sane person would be delighted to be admitted." Tennyson spent some time there during Clare's period of residence, although there is no evidence that they met. It was at High Beach that Clare identified so closely with Byron that he wrote some "extra" stanzas of *Don Juan*, catching Byron's tone if not his technical adroitness; scatological and satirical by turns, contemptuous of Parliament and the Royal Family, they exhibit unnerving moments of conscious self-laceration:



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Lord Byron, poh—the man wot writes the
werses
And is just what he is and nothing more,
Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses
And makes all nothing as it was before,
Who wed two wives and oft the truth rehearses
And might have had some twenty thousand
more,
Who has been dead, so fools their lies are
giving,
And still in Allen's madhouse caged and living.

In 1841 Clare absconded from the asylum and walked the eighty miles back to Northborough, keeping a remarkable journal of his experiences which Bate usefully includes in his selection of poems. At the end of that year he was taken to another asylum at Northampton, where he remained until his death. During much of this time he continued to write, producing some shapeless and incoherent work but also, in lucid intervals, some of his finest poetry. This was preserved thanks to an asylum worker, William Knight, who recognized its quality and transcribed it, grappling, like Taylor before him, with Clare's unpunctuated and semi-legible handwriting.

Bate stresses that "It would be a mistake to suppose that there was just one thing wrong" with Clare, or that "his problems had a single cause." On the surviving evidence he "is most unlikely to have been a schizophrenic," a more probable diagnosis being "manic depression or 'bipolar affective disorder'" for which a modern doctor would prescribe Prozac or Lithium. "It is worth wondering," Bate adds trenchantly, "whether such a prescription would have saved him from the asylum at the cost of killing his poetic muse"; still more disturbingly, "He may have become psychotic because he was surrounded by psychosis." He was better cared for at Northampton, at all events, than at home; there is no evidence that his wife, who outlived him, visited him in the asylum once in the twenty-three years he was there. The asylum, "much the grandest building that Clare ever lived in," and where, much later, James Joyce's daughter Lucia died, was run on principles remarkably enlightened for the time. Provided he was not violent, Clare was free to treat it as a home, to walk about the grounds, and to write. "Free," however, is a comparative term; psychological enclosure hemmed him in still, as he complained in a voice sometimes very like that of Blake:

In every language upon earth,
On every shore, o'er every sea,
I gave my name immortal birth
And kept my spirit with the free.

The two poems entitled "Lines: 'I Am'" and "Sonnet: 'I Am'" contain some of Clare's most familiar lines: "I am the self-consumer of my woes," the tumult of "the nothingness of scorn and noise," "the living sea of waking dreams," and this passage, recalling Hamlet on being the king of infinite space:

I was a being created in the race
Of men disdaining bounds of place and time—
A spirit that could travel o'er the space
Of earth and heaven like a thought sublime,
Tracing creation, like my maker, free—
A soul unshackled—like eternity,
Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall.
But now I only know I am—that's all.

This is often compared to the Emily Brontë variety of Romanticism, but it is the opposite of that, not proud self-assertion but desperate frustration with the limitations of physical existence. Bate brilliantly sees that Clare, "the poet of circular motions," had a strong streak of Platonism in him, which made his longing for childhood innocence and the oblivion of the grave dual aspects of the same imaginative impulse.

The letters Clare wrote to his son from Northampton are heart-breaking, often consisting simply of the names of people he remembers at Helpston. He also made lists of girls' names, which Bate reports have been compared by a feminist, Lynne Pearce, to the productions of a "sex-murderer." Lynne Pearce ought to be ashamed of herself. Bate



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is surely right to feel that the lists are Clare's attempt to "hold on to his past, his identity." He could only do this by writing, and as his control of his writing failed, so his despondency increased. Scraps of his conversation, recorded by visitors, tell the same story. "Why," he told one young lady in 1860, "they have cut off my head and picked out all the letters in the alphabet—all the vowels and all the consonants and brought them out through my ears—and then they want me to write poetry! I can't do it." Yet only a few months earlier he had addressed himself—"Well, honest John, how fare you now at *home?*"—*and lingered lovingly over remembered* scenes: birds building their nests, the cockerel strutting with the hens, the pigs asleep in the sty, the little boys cramming marbles back into their pockets as they read about Jack the Giant-killer. There was not much more to come, however. The giants won. Clare fell silent, poetically and personally, except for bouts of colorful profanity. On May 20, 1864, crippled by several strokes, he died quietly in his bed, having lived "twice the age of Burns and four times that of Chatterton." "I have lived too long. I want to go home," he had frequently said in the last stages of his long decline.

Clare does not lend himself well to close analytical criticism. He made few formal innovations, being content with traditional, hymn-like metres, rhyming couplets, or sonnets—though Bate does note his sometimes putting the couplet at the start of the sonnet rather than at the end. He works by accumulation rather than compression, which makes him hard to quote in excerpts, though he can achieve haunting individual lines, such as "The present is the funeral of the past." The reader needs patience, for the quality of Clare's output is variable, its beauties easy to overlook, its lyric strain self-communing rather than self-advertising. In a sonnet addressed to the Dutch water-color painter Peter de Wint, Clare praises the artist's abstention from "painted freaks" and "wild romantic sky" in favor of "spots . . . Where common skill sees nothing deemed divine":

> thy young pencil worked such rich surprise
> That rushy flats befringed with willow tree
> Rivalled the beauties of Italian skies.

Bate justly makes the comparison to Clare himself. He is a poet to be read slowly and mulled over, an elegist without sentimentality and an authentic spokesman for a vanished world.

In his last two chapters, Bate surveys Clare's country today and estimates his poetic legacy. There is still an annual Clare Festival in Helpston; the poet's cottage is now occupied by the wonderfully named *Mrs. Robin Goodfellow*; *Crossberry Way* has become an up-market housing estate called Marymede, after Clare's first love (not in fact a Helpston girl); the spot once occupied by Clare's orchard now boasts "a gift shop specialising in teddy bears." Thus we go about the business of our "Heritage industry," oblivious to the real heritage which lies all around us. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Clare attracted the sympathetic attention of a few enthusiasts, among them Arthur Symons, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, John and Anne Tibble, Geoffrey Grigson, and James Reeves, all of whom published selections—Reeves's with a perceptive introduction ("There never was a more helpless and more completely possessed victim of poetry"). Poets, rather than critics, kept Clare alive; Leavis, Empson, Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, all passed him by. Theodore Roethke, himself driven by demons, and, more startlingly, John Ashbery, have paid their tributes.

Eric Robinson, to whom we owe the monumental Oxford edition, which exactly reproduces the manuscripts, has claimed, controversially, to own exclusive copyright in all Clare's published and unpublished works, and has shown himself willing to defend this claim in the courts. That Bate has been able to acknowledge Robinson's support is a great tribute to his powers of persuasion. Robinson's edition is irreplaceable, albeit ruinously expensive (Clare could never have afforded it), but Bate's selection and biography do honor to himself, to Clare, and to poetry.



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# Delusion & inhumanity

*Richard Drake*
Apostles and Agitators:
Italy's Marxist Revolutionary Tradition.
Harvard University Press, 288 pages $45.

*reviewed by David Pryce-Jones*

Revolution was a topic supremely exercising intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In one country after another, self-selected and self-admiring men and a few women took their inspiration from the French revolution and Karl Marx. They met, corresponded with one another, and concerted their programs, and sometimes their conspiracies, through the Second and then the Third International. As though it were a mere matter of opportunity and organization, they debated who was to be murdered, and when and how, and in what numbers. These debates found consummation in the careers of Lenin and Stalin, and their many imitators, arguably including Hitler. And by means of the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting, as Auden was to put it, people of supposedly sensitive disposition were promoting the execution squad and the armed mobs in the street, thus becoming accessories to the totalitarian crimes of the recent age.

Many have likened the unconditional surrender of so many intellectuals to Marxism to a religious phenomenon, and the passing of time seems more and more to confirm such an explanation. Marx was an improbable deity. For all the wide range of his reading, he was coarse and brutal as a thinker, as in the way he lived. Prescription for him was the end of argument. But he had the one over-arching idea that class warfare is the motor necessarily driving history. Deemed elect by definition, the proletariat was to dispossess and eliminate other classes, whether feudal, bourgeois, or capitalist, all deemed irredeemably non-elect, therefore condemned to death. The idea of class warfare appealed naturally to hard men because it could serve so well to justify a predisposition to murder strong enough altogether to detach them from reality.

Class is only a figment, a reduction of human beings to their material means and occupations, in short one of those vacuous organizing principles that those with a sociological bent like Marx are in the habit of inventing. Marx's one-time friend, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and certainly a hard man, foresaw that the projected "dictatorship of the proletariat" was bound to end in tyranny and corpses. Such admirers of Marx as Friedrich Engels, Eduard Bernstein, and Karl Kautsky also came to have doctrinal doubts, but still class warfare as a sacrosanct engine of politics and history worked its way deep into the European imagination, to become the core value of the Communist Party.

Class warfare took on different glosses in different nations. In Italy, the hard men were formed in a famously historic culture of violence, compounded with genuine revolution against foreign occupiers as well as the turmoil of the *Risorgimento*. There was also plenty of injustice and inequality for the hard men to latch on to. Naples and the southern provinces were a by-word for human misery.

Richard Drake is an academic who has previously written about the Italian Left, and in *Apostles and Agitators* he describes in self-contained essays the careers of seven of Marx's principle disciples in Italy, the hard men who perpetuated his influence and built the Communist movement there. Giving his accounts of these leading Italian Marxists, Drake has based himself almost exclusively on their publications, reported speeches, and letters. The result is certainly elegant, but limited by its literary approach, not to say stylization. The context in which these hard men operated is left to look after itself. The industrial unrest, peasant uprisings, political crises, wars and other events against which to measure the opinion and careers of these revolutionaries are passed over with a distant nod at most. Also accorded only an oblique mention here and there was what Drake calls a "time-honored play between reform and revolution." He drops the names of the reformers—Filippo Turati, Giovanni Giolitti



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—on to the pages as though they were self-explanatory. Specialists alone will be able to fill in the blanks, and know that those who advocated reform were both brave and right in their stand. It is only when measured properly against reformers that revolutionaries stand revealed as the monsters they were.

Again, the names of the revolutionaries for the most part will be familiar only to specialists. Carlo Cafiero, for instance, came from a privileged background, spent some time in London where he knew and idolized Marx, married an aristocratic lady, and lavished his fortune on promoting revolution. The first to popularize the writings of Marx in Italy, he himself understood that in the revolution people would have to be killed, and he glorified "the knife, the rifle, and dynamite." He died in the mad-house. Antonio Labriola wrote what Drake calls "a major work of Marxist theory" with the characteristic title of "Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History." Arturo Labriola (no relation of Antonio) met and worked with Georges Sorel in Paris, and through him came to believe that workers' strikes would trigger the revolution. He lived until 1959, long enough to be able to understand the futility of his life's work, and to renounce it.

Benito Mussolini was self-educated, and he too came to Marxism via Sorel, picking up and adopting the idea of class struggle. Undoubtedly he was a hard man, with no qualms about a revolution which would kill people. Opposing the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, he was sent to prison for a year. Right up to the eve of the First War, he was calling Marx "the magnificent philosopher of violence," and advocating left-wing revolution and a neutral foreign policy. The revolutionary wing of the Socialist Party made a hero of him. Once the war was under way, however, he reversed his opinion abruptly but sincerely, and was expelled from the party. Joining the army, he rose like Hitler to non-commissioned rank. Mussolini founded his fascist movement in 1919; his revolutionary friends put on black shirts, and not long afterwards they began to persecute and murder erstwhile colleagues in true Marxist style. Drake makes it unmistakably clear that Italian fascism was a split-off or mutant from revolutionary socialism.

The Communist Party was founded at the same moment out of the rump of the revolutionary socialists. Amadeo Bordiga, its first secretary general, had been a close colleague of Mussolini's. Class war was imperative in his opinion, and he welcomed the Bolshevik revolution as a fine example of it. Not quite agile enough, he backed Trotsky against Stalin, and was lucky to live to tell the tale. Antonio Gramsci replaced him as secretary general. Born into a poor Sardinian family in 1891, he suffered from a hump on his back and general bad health. Like Mussolini, he was a brilliant journalist. The fascist regime cracked down on the Communist Party and dissipated it in 1926, sending Gramsci to prison. Before his death there in 1937 he was able to write copiously, developing the original view that Communists ought to evolve from the tactic of primitive revolution, and instead infiltrate the institutions of society and so take power from within. Their conspicuous success in doing exactly this in the post-Stalin era has given Gramsci a reputation as "the most famous and influential Marxist in the world today," in Drake's words.

Palmiro Togliatti was Gramsci's rival and successor. Much of his career in the Mussolini period and right through the Second War was spent in Moscow as a Comintern agent. His most important Comintern assignment was in Spain during the civil war there, when he was responsible for sending many Communists to their death. A hard man certainly, a slave-executioner, he could read the omens correctly and took due care to back Stalin in matters great and small, and so survived to return to Italy in 1945, lead the Communist party, and enter the government. In an example of black humor, this blood-drenched old Stalinist was soon overtaken by Italian Maoists, and the likes of Adriano Sofri and Toni Negri, the founding



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fathers of the Red Brigades. Almost exclusively born into privileged backgrounds, the members of the Red Brigades murdered twelve hundred people before the state at last mobilized, brought them to justice, and sentenced them to prison. Perhaps second only to the Soviet Union, Italy cherished the tradition of revolutionary Marxism, but seemingly it has come to an end there too, and all that survives is the memory of delusion and inhumanity.

# Leap of faith

*John E. Ferling* A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic. Oxford Press, 576 pages, $30

*reviewed by Marc Arkin*

Pessimists, as the saying goes, see the glass half empty, optimists see the glass half full. John Ferling's new book, *A Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic*, is definitely one for the half empty crowd. Midway through, after more than two hundred pages lurching from crisis to ever deeper crisis, faced with bumbling generals, mutinous soldiers, conniving junior officers, rapacious land speculators, war profiteering merchants, inept state legislators, and a shortsighted national leadership, the reader almost wishes that the British would just come back and rescue the whole doomed enterprise from itself. And Ferling is still talking about the Revolutionary War. He hasn't even begun to tackle the horse-trading that surrounded the constitutional convention, much less the political ugliness of the late Federal period, a time that one shocked historian called "an age of passion" after he discovered Jeffersonians regularly toasting "a speedy death to General Washington." The failure of the new nation to implode given this unrelentingly dismal parade of people and events gives new force to the old line that God takes care of drunks and the United States of America.

Professor Ferling derives an almost perverse delight in presenting the dark side of the nation's early years, first in the struggle to separate from Great Britain, then in the effort to form a viable national union, and finally in the contest over the direction that the new government would take. His subject spans the period from the Albany Convention of 1754, at which colonial leaders (including Benjamin Franklin) met to consider a common defense during the French and Indian War, to the 1801 inauguration of Thomas Jefferson, which he portrays as a hopeful vindication of America's egalitarian revolutionary potential. Along the way, he takes the time to debunk the historical reputation of everyone from Tom Paine to Benjamin Franklin.

Take, for example, the treatment of George Washington. Although to Colonel Henry Lee and generations to follow, Washington was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," to Ferling, Washington was a blundering general whose military career began inauspiciously when, in 1754, he led the ambush of a French military party on a peaceful mission and, "unmanned" at the sight of blood, permitted his Indian allies to massacre the Frenchmen after they had surrendered. With a nice attention to detail, Ferling recounts that, while Washington stood by and watched, the Indian leader, Half King, scalped the French commander, scooped out his "still warm brain and squeezed it in his hands." In Ferling's telling, as the years unfold, Washington turns into an intellectually limited leader, a manipulative actor before his troops, the pawn of Hamilton, and a man of regal airs whose personal style undercut the egalitarian ideals of the revolution for which he fought. The unanswered question is why a man of such modest parts should have been the sole figure to whom everyone in the new nation turned to guide it through its perilous beginnings.

*A Leap in the Dark* embodies a style of epic political history that is increasingly rare in these days of cultural and thematic studies. It focuses primarily on great men (and with one or two exceptions, they were men) and



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on the great events in which they participated. In this narrative, forces such as religion and slavery receive short shrift; its economic analysis has hardly advanced beyond that of the late historian Charles Beard who argued that the delegates to the constitutional convention who held public securities all supported undemocratic positions in an effort, conscious or otherwise, to protect their investments. Ferling does update the story slightly: Borrowing from James Madison, he describes the delegates as "'creditors . . . a landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a moneyed interest,'" people drawn "overwhelmingly from the top rung" of colonial society. Sniffily, Ferling concludes, they "were not disinterested men." With their ascendancy, the security of the federal union came at a "steep price;" the stifling "of other, more radical, sentiments that sprang from Whig ideology and the logic of the Revolution."

As the foregoing shows, for an author dedicated to undercutting the hagiography of the founding, Professor Ferling is rather devoted to a few myths of his own. He stands unabashedly in the line of "Progressive" historians founded by Beard, writers who claimed that the federal constitution was both counterrevolutionary in intention and effect and who viewed the entire early national period as a manichean struggle between the advocates of property rights and the advocates of human rights. In Ferling's modernized version, the founding decades were a tug of war between conservative nationalists, representing northern mercantile interests—read Alexander Hamilton and the eventual Federalist Party—and agrarian populists who favored state power and a weak national government—Thomas Jefferson and the nascent Republicans. Ferling admits that Hamilton's economic policies were the way of the future, allowing the young nation to develop enough strength to withstand the incessant wranglings of the great powers of Europe. Yet he still seems to pine for that arcadian Jeffersonian utopia, led by a yeoman alliance of northern artisans and frontier farmers.

This soft spot leads Ferling to place his thumb on the scale of history, reflexively presenting the conventional picture of Jeffersonian Republicans as egalitarian progressives and Hamiltonian Federalists as, at best, elitist reactionaries. On the one hand, he goes rather lightly on Jefferson, avoiding his well-known personal foibles altogether and writing off much of Jefferson's acknowledged political duplicity as prescience regarding the future direction of American party politics, a direction he did much to shape. The rough and tumble of party loyalties notwithstanding, how many Secretaries of State have funded an opposition newspaper and fed it tidbits of useful information as Jefferson did with Philip Freneau's *National Gazette*? And then denied his conduct boldfaced when confronted by Washington? Or for that matter, maintained a private foreign policy at odds with that of the administration, as Jefferson did in his back channel contacts with the French?

On the other hand, Hamilton and his followers are given no quarter. Described as Anglomanic cryptomonarchists, they were "committed to rigidly maintaining the traditional hierarchical society, and to wishfully dreaming of every American 'learning his proper place in society and keeping to it.'" (The double split infinitive is all that needs be said about the author's stylistic propensities.) It must be admitted that John Adams's suggestion that the president be addressed as "His High Mightiness" betrays one of the great political tin ears of all time, a lack of judgment that eventually played itself out in the disastrous Alien and Sedition Acts. Like Adams and Hamilton, many of the Federalists were self-made men, coming from families of the middling sort who had emerged in the social vacuum that followed the Revolution. But Ferling sees no virtue in this demonstration of upward mobility. Rather, he asserts, "more than a whiff of hypocrisy" characterized their attachment to the stability that they hoped would arise from a government of "the wise, the good, and the well-to-do." From Ferling's



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perspective, they were simply traitors to their class.

Who were these greedy elitists who supposedly did their best to hijack the revolution and who certainly managed to get some of the most enduring bad press in American history for their cause and beliefs? As personalities, Ferling hardly does them justice. Fisher Ames—a leader of the Hamiltonian party and Boston's representative in the first four Congresses—is archly described as spending the revolutionary war "luxuriating in a life of self-indulgence until at age twenty-one he undertook law studies." What Ferling neglects to say is that it was hardly a luxurious life; Ames's mother ran a tavern in Dedham where the family lived; his father had been an almanac maker and he was supported through Harvard by his cranky doctor brother—who later became a Jeffersonian. Although no egalitarian, Ames once admonished his son for making light of the local Baptists: "Be careful how you show scorn and contempt for these poor people, and indeed for anybody as long as you live. In the course of our lives we can hardly avoid making too many enemies, and contempt is bitterly remembered when real injuries are forgotten." Similarly, Ames distanced himself from the opposition to building a theater in Boston, "Whether the stage is a friend or foe to taste and morals is possibly not capable of very full proof; nor does it seem to me necessary to decide the point. . . . For as people earn their own money, it seems reasonable that they should spend it."

Theodore Sedgwick, another self-made lawyer who hailed from the Berkshires and represented Massachusetts in both House and Senate, fares even worse in Ferling's account. He is depicted at length as having more sympathy for the Tories whose land was confiscated by the Commonwealth government during the war than for his western neighbors whose overtaxation led to Shays's Rebellion. Yet Sedgwick's attachment to the hierarchical nature of society had certain interesting limits; as a lawyer in 1781, he represented pro bono a slave named Elizabeth Freeman, better known as Mumbet, in her suit for freedom against her abusive master, one Colonel Ashley. Basing his argument on the newly adopted Massachusetts constitution, which guaranteed equal rights to all, Sedgwick convinced a Great Barrington jury to set Mumbet free and to order her master to pay thirty shillings and costs. It was Mumbet—now the Sedgwick family's paid housekeeper—who famously saved the Sedgwick house from foraging Shaysite rebels by hiding the family silver under her bed.

So, there is more to this elitism than meets the eye. Ferling is right that, as a group, the conservatives were skeptical of broad popular participation in government—a not unattractive position in light of the recent electoral silly season in California. Instead, they associated what they called "democracy"—as opposed to "republicanism," to which they devoted their lives in public service, a distinction that eludes Ferling—with mob rule and believed their fears vindicated by the eventual excesses of the French Revolution. Lacking any models more recent than Periclean Athens or the Swiss cantons to go on, they were obsessed with controlling the insatiable human desire for power and believed that unfettered popular rule would inevitably pave the way for the insinuating flattery of a demagogue and a descent into the arbitrary power of despotism. After more than two hundred years of stable republican government, it is easy to belittle their fears; at the time, the Terror and the Bonapartist coup bore them out only too well.

But if they had fears, they also had a positive vision, one which accounted for talent as well as for order. Recognizing the natural inequalities of men, Theophilus Parsons explained, "In the political ship, there must be common seamen as well as pilots; and a mutiny of the crew may as effectually destroy her as a division among the officers." Society was an organism, a "moral whole," and it was the obligation of those who were among the wise, the good, and the wealthy to govern in the "interest of the whole." What, then, of their much scorned elevation of property



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rights over human rights? It is true that Ames summed up their view neatly when he opined that, "The essence, and almost the quintessence, of a good government is, to protect property and its rights." Yet, even the great Hamilton recognized that, in the unlikely event, certain property rights proved "contrary to the social order and to the permanent welfare of society," they ought to be abolished—with compensation, if possible. But, if compensation were not possible, that "ought not to be an obstacle to a clearly essential reform."

The problem is that most Americans of the founding generation did not see the same dichotomy between rights and property that modern Progressives do. As the historian Edmund Morgan observed, "For eighteenth century Americans, property and liberty were one and inseparable, because property was the only foundation yet conceived for security of life and liberty: without security for his property, it was thought, no man could live or be free except at the mercy of another." Their revolutionary rallying cry was "Liberty and Property" not "Liberty and Democracy." The purpose of a strong central government was to safeguard the very interests that kept its powers ultimately in check.

Of course, not all forms of property were equal to the Federalists. Most of them, like Sedgwick and John Jay, not to mention Franklin and Hamilton, were early opponents of slavery. In fact, the issue of slavery provides a good window onto Ferling's oversimplified vision of both parties, and, in particular, his romantic idealization of Republicanism. Despite their "radical dreams," both Jefferson and Madison were slaveholders and, in many of their policies, apologists for the peculiar institution and the southern aristocracy that depended upon it. Astonishingly, Ferling's treatment of the role of slavery in the formation of the constitution takes less than three pages, because, he suggests, slavery was not an important issue to the Framers. Yet it certainly played a crucial role in the political transition from Federalism to Republicanism, irretrievably tainting the first Jefferson administration in the eyes of much of New England. Even with all the blunders of the Adams administration, Jefferson defeated Adams in 1800 only because of the extra representation given the south in the electoral college through the constitutional provision that treated slaves as three-fifths of a person for purposes of apportionment. Without the three-fifths clause, Adams would have squeaked by with an electoral college vote of sixty-three to sixty-one and gone on to a second term.

Speaking of elections, Ferling frequently remarks that blacks, women, and men who could not meet the property requirement were all disenfranchised during the early years of the republic, implicitly blaming the forces of hierarchy and property. Yet recent studies have shown that women, although legally disenfranchised, were far more welcome among Federalists than among Republicans. And as for free blacks, the picture is even more confounding to the conventional wisdom. *Pace* Ferling, free black men were able to vote in a number of northern states during the early republic, including New York and Massachusetts. Their disenfranchisement came not at the hands of Federalists, but through the workings of Republicans who discovered that blacks overwhelmingly voted Federalist out of distaste for the pro-slavery policies of Jefferson. And in this, they were not wrong. For, in a final anecdote, while egalitarian Jefferson's slaves were sold at his death to clear the debts of his bankrupt estate, that canny aristocratic land speculator George Washington never allowed slave labor to appear at a public function of the United States during his presidency; by his will, Washington freed all his slaves upon the death of his wife, Martha. Recognizing an incentive when she saw one, Martha freed them immediately.

If, as Voltaire once said, history is a pack of tricks that the present plays on the past, then those first American conservatives have been playing against a stacked deck for a very long time. Taking a hard look at the facts, it may be about time to rethink that hand.



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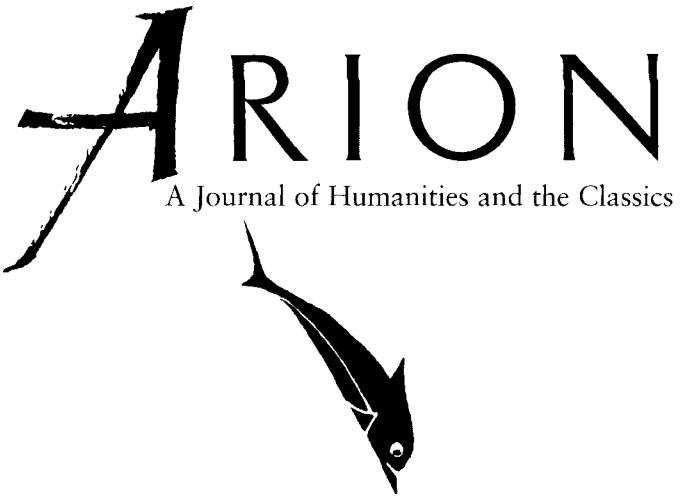


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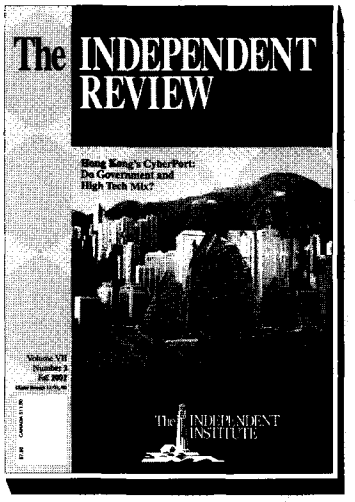


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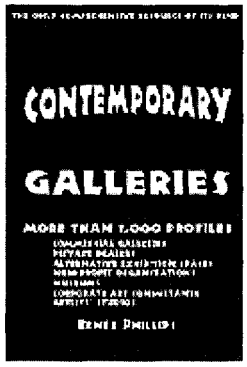


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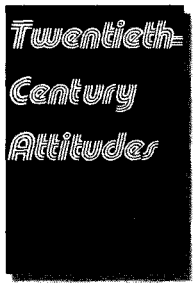


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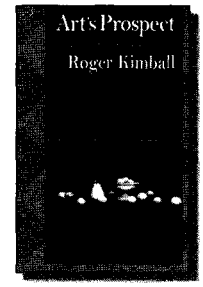


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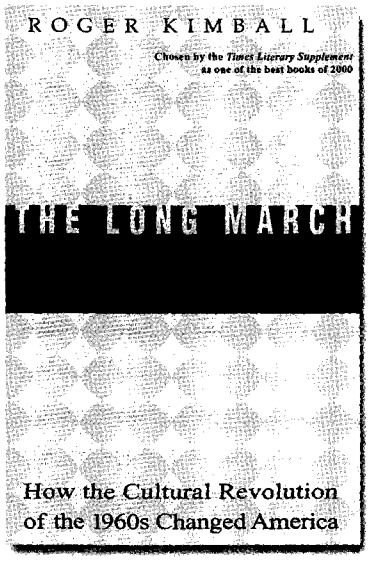
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